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THE ART OF THE RIDICULOUS SUBLIME
On David Lynch's Lost Highway
Slavoj Zizek

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The Ridiculous, Sublime Art of Slavoj Zizek

Marek Wieczorek

Slavoj Zizek is one of the great minds of our time. Commentators have hailed the Slovenian thinker as "the most formidably brilliant exponent of psychoanalysis, indeed of cultural theory in general, to have emerged in Europe for some decades."1

The originality of Zizek's contribution to Western intellectual history lies in his extraordinary fusion of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, continental philosophy (in particular his anti-essentialist readings of Hegel), and Marxist political theory. He lucidly illustrates this sublime thought with examples drawn from literary and popular culture, including not only Shakespeare, Wagner, or Kafka, but also film noir, soap operas, cartoons, and dirty jokes, which often border on the ridiculous. "I am convinced of my proper grasp of some Lacanian concept, "Zizek writes, "only when I can translate it successfully into the inherent imbecility of popular culture."2 *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's Lost Highway* characteristically offers a flamboyant parade of topics that reaches far beyond the scope of Lynch's movie, delving into film theory, ethics, politics, and cyberspace.

In contrast to prevailing readings of Lynch's films as obscurantist New Age allusions to a peaceful spiritual rapture underlying irrational forces, or as a convoluted post-modern pastiche of cliches, Zizek insists on taking Lynch seriously. This means, for Zizek, reading him through Lacan. Zizek's Lacan is not the Lacan of post-structuralism, the theorist of the floating signifier, but the Lacan of the Real, the first category in the famous Lacanian triad of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. The most under-represented of the Lacanian categories, the Real is also the most unfathomable because it is fundamentally impenetrable and cannot be assimilated to the symbolic order of language and communication (the fabric of daily life); nor does it belong to the Imaginary, the domain of images with which we identify and which capture our attention. According to Lacan, fantasy is the ultimate support of our "sense of reality. "3 The Real is the hidden "traumatic underside of our existence or sense of reality, whose disturbing effects are felt in strange and unexpected places: the Lacanian Sublime. Lynch's films attest to the fact that the fantasmatic support of reality functions as a defense against the Real, which often intrudes into the lives of the protagonists in the form of extreme situations, through violence or sexual excesses, in disturbing behavior that is both horrific and enjoyable, or in the uncanny effects of close-ups or details. The unfathomable, traumatic nature of the situations Lynch creates also makes them sublime.

Illustrating his point about the Lynchean Real, Zizek has elsewhere invoked the famous opening scene from Blue Velvet: the broad shots of idyllic small-town Middle America with a father watering the lawn; suddenly, the father suffers a stroke or heart-attack while the camera dramatically zooms in on the grass with its bustling microscopic world of insects. "Lynch's entire 'ontology,"' Zizek writes, "is based upon the discordance between reality, observed from a

safe distance, and the absolute proximity of the Real. His elementary procedure involves moving forward from the establishing shot of reality to a disturbing proximity that renders visible the disgusting substance of enjoyment, the crawling and glistening of indestructible life."4 Zizek notes how in Lynch's universe the Real eerily invades daily existence, with the camera's point of view often too close for comfort, with uncanny details sticking out, or close-ups of insects or decomposing bodies. One is reminded here of Dali's fascination with insects, going back to a childhood memory of finding a dead bird with ants crawling into it. Just as Dali relived this traumatic experience through his paintings and in his film with Bunuel, *Un chien andalou*, Lynch has also made paintings with similar subject matter, as well as sculpted heads, with real ants invading rotting meats and bird cadavers affixed to the artwork.5 Lynch's technique characteristically consists of juxtaposing two incompatible, mutually exclusive realms which he nevertheless allows to invade one another: the symbolic realm of representation (painting or sculpture) and the Real (the decomposing meat and the ants teeming with life).

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology (1989)*, Zizek writes that "there is nothing intrinsically sublime in a sublime object-according to Lacan, a sublime object is an ordinary, everyday object which, quite by chance, finds itself occupying the place of what he calls *das Ding* [the Thing], the impossible-real object of desire. . . . It is its structural place-the fact that it occupies the sacred/forbidden place of jouissance and not its intrinsic qualities that confers on it its sublimity."6 Lynch's Lost Highway invokes the Lacanian Sublime in the most enigmatic ways. In the essay published here, Zizek shows how the obstacle in the life of the protagonist is precisely of the order of a fantasmatic projection onto an impossible object of desire. About one-third into Lost Highway, the protagonist (Fred), who has been sentenced to death for the murder of his ostensibly unfaithful wife (Renee), inexplicably transforms into another person (Pete) in his prison cell. What follows is a bizarre shift from the dull, drab existence of the impotent husband and his brunette wife, to the exciting and dangerous life of the younger, virile Pete who is seduced by the sexually aggressive femme fatale reincarnation of Renee, a blonde named Alice, played by the same actress (Patricia Arquette). This shift, Zizek argues, represents Fred's psychotic hallucination, after the slaughter of his wife, of himself as a virile lover-a fantasmatic scenario that ends up being more nightmarish than the first part of the film.

Renee is a sublime object because Fred is ambiguously obsessed with her; he suspects that her previous life involved some lewd or pornographic occupation, that is to say, some secret, impenetrable place of jouissance (obscene enjoyment), which is subsequently staged as a fantasmatic way out that nevertheless ends in failure.

According to Zizek, the circular narrative of Lost Highway renders visible the circularity of the psychoanalytic process itself: there is a symptomatic key phrase (as in all of Lynch's films) that always returns as an insistent, traumatic, and indecipherable message (the Real), and there is a temporal loop, as with

analysis, where the protagonist at first fails to encounter the self, but in the end is able to pronounce the symptom consciously as his own. In Lost Highway this is the phrase Fred hears at the very beginning of the film through the intercom of his house, "Dick Laurant is dead," referring to the evil and obscene Mr. Eddy to whom Alice belongs. With the transition to the second part of the film, the obstacle/failure thus changes from being inherent (Fred's impotence) to external (Mr. Eddy as the intervening "father-figure" of the Oedipal triangle), which corresponds to the very definition of fantasy, whereby the inherent deadlock acquires positive existence. At the end of the film, Fred kills Mr. Eddy and pronounces the (no longer enigmatic) phrase to himself through the intercom.

Zizek's reading is structured around a complex set of complementary oppositions: that of reality and its fantasmatic support, and of the law and its inherent transgression, which in Lynch's universe are marked by the opposition of the ridiculous and the sublime. Mr. Eddy is one of those Lynchean figures who embodies both poles: on the one hand, he strictly enforces the rules, representing the enactment of the socio-symbolic Law, but on the other, he does so in such an exaggerated, excessively violent manner that his role exposes the inherently violent and arbitrary nature of the law. Mr. Eddy is one of those sublime, hyperactive, life-enjoying agents against which the characters in Lynch's films attempt to protect themselves by resorting to a fantasy, equally ridiculous, of something innocuously beautiful. "The gap that separates beauty from ugliness," Zizek writes, "is the very gap that separates reality from the Real: what constitutes reality is the minimum of idealization the subject needs in order to sustain the horror of the Real."7 In Lynch's universe, this minimum of idealization is often pushed to the limits of believability, indeed to the level of the ridiculous and thus exposed as fantasmatic, as in the pathetic scenes of beatitude, with apparitions of angels (Fire Walk with Me and Wild at Heart) or a dream about robins (Blue Velvet). Or it is contrasted with its sublime counterpart, the larger-than-life, hyperactive figures embodying pure enjoyment and excessive evil, such as Frank in Blue Velvet, Bobby Peru in Wild at Heart, or Mr. Eddy, whom Zizek calls *Pere jouissance* (father of enjoyment). By using extreme oppositions, Zizek argues, Lynch shows that evil is mediated, that there is a speculative identity to good and evil, 8 that instead of being a substantial force, evil is reflexivized and composed of ludicrous clichés. He presents reality and its fantasmatic support on the same surface, as a complementarity or coincidence of opposites, as in itself necessarily multiple and inconsistent. It is this enigmatic juxtaposition or coincidence of opposites in Lynch's films-of the protagonists' comical fixation on an ordinary yet "sublime" object; of an unbearably naive yet deadly serious vision; or the redemptive quality of clichés-that makes them paradigmatically post-modern, corresponding to what Zizek here qualifies as the enigma of "postmodernity".

There is a radical decentering of human subjectivity characteristic of Freudian/Lacanian theory that runs through Zizek's essay on Lynch, ranging from his analyses of a wide variety of films to his incisive commentary on contem-

porary politics. The uncanny specter of the automatic, mechanical production of our innermost feelings provides the model for Lacan's notion of the "empty subject," the barred subject (represented by the mathematical symbol $) whose innermost fantasmatic kernel is transposed onto the "big Other," "the symbolic order which is the external place of the subject's truth."9 Since our desire is always the desire of the Other-that is, both drawn from the Other and directed to it-the disturbing thing is that we can never be certain what this Other demands of us, what we are expected to be. Fred is perplexed by Renee/Alice's obscure desire, for example, and endlessly tries to interpret what she wants. Zizek also demonstrates the idea of the big Other through reference to Roberto Benigni's film Life Is Beautiful. Here a father attempts to shield his little son from the atrocities (the unbearable, unrepresentable Real) of a Nazi concentration camp through the competitive evocation of the Other's desire, as though they were simply playing a game of survival, a metaphor for the symbolic fiction that renders reality bearable. Although this film remains problematic, in part because it also treats its spectators as children, Zizek prefers Benigni's scenario to that of Spielberg's Schindler's List, which portrays the experience of a Nazi camp commander who seems torn between his racist prejudices and sexual attraction to a Jewish prisoner, as though it were simply an expression of his immediate psychological self-experience. The problem with this and other at-tempts to represent the Holocaust, according to Zizek, is that it tries to explain the horrors of Nazism (or Stalinism) through the "psychological profiles" of the individual perpetrators of atrocities.

Zizek's rigorously ethical stance brings him to such extremes as to argue, both in earlier writings and in this essay on Lynch, that Stalinism provides an accurate model for understanding the institution of the symbolic order of our daily lives. To speak of a Lacanian ethics of the Real is particularly appropriate when we realize that Zizek's understanding of Lacan was profoundly marked by his first-hand experience of the absurdities of bureaucratic communism in the former Yugoslavia (as well as the more recent "ethnic cleansing" and other atrocities committed in the Balkans in the name of nationalism). He explains the crimes committed in Stalin's or Hitler's name not through the psychology or perverse nature of the individuals involved, but through the logic of the big Other. As Zizek shows in this essay, the question is not a matter of the psychic economy of individuals versus the objective ideological system of the symbolic order. Lacan has shown, precisely, how the subject is a function of the gap between the two, that, as Zizek writes here, "the difference between 'subjective' pathologies and the libidinal economy of the 'objective' ideological system is ultimately something inherent to the subject." Although nobody really believes in the ruling ideology, we nevertheless strive to keep up its appearance, which illuminates "the status of deception in ideology: those who should be deceived by the ideological 'illusion' are not primarily concrete individuals but, rather, the big Other; we should thus say that Stalinism has a value as the ontological proof of the existence of the big Other."'0 Zizek argues that the institution exists only when people believe in it, or, rather, act as if they believe in it. The

institution not only numbs people; they can also be indifferent to the effects of their own actions because the system acts (and hates) on their behalf. As Terry Eagleton notes, "Zizek sees ideological power as resting finally on the libidinal rather than the conceptual, on the way we hug our chains rather than the way we entertain beliefs."11

According to Lacan, the drive is inherently ethical because, as Zizek elsewhere explains, the drive "is not 'blind animal thriving,' but the ethical compulsion which compels us to mark repeatedly the memory of a lost cause."12 Zizek has expanded this psychoanalytic insight into the realm of politics. The drive is the compulsion to revisit, to encircle again and again, those sites of lost causes, of shattered and perverted dreams and hopes, not out of nostalgic longing for something that was believed to be good and only contingently corrupted (Communism), nor as a cautioning against the recurrence of gruesome or traumatic events (Nazism), but because the marking of all lost causes signals the impossibility of all totalizing ethics and morals.13

In this sense, Zizek's method shares much in common with Ernesto Laclau's notion of an "ethical bricolage," a kind of mediation between deconstructionist undecidability and Levinasian ultra-ethics.14

Zizek sees the "end of psychology" in contemporary culture despite (or precisely because of) what appears to be an increasing "psychologization" of social life: through the personal confessions in game shows and sitcoms people increasingly talk like puppets, and politicians' public confessions of their private feelings about political decisions mask a widespread cynicism. Against the ideology of "psychologically convincing" characters, Zizek favors Lynch's "extraneation" of the characters, the effects of which are strangely de-realized or de-psychologized persons. There is a method to Lynch's madness, so to speak. The psychological unity of the characters disintegrates into a "spiritual transubstantiation of common cliche's," as Zizek calls it here, and into outbursts of the brutal Real, with reality and its fantasmatic supplement acting side by side, as though existing on the same surface. Ultimately, Zizek's reading of Lynch, and by extension Lynch's film itself, is profoundly political. Their common method is the opposite of obscurantism or pastiche of arcane topics. Both in their own way provide proof that our fantasies support our sense of reality, and that this is in turn a defense against the Real. Together with their sublime thought, both Lynch and Zizek are profoundly entertaining through their ridiculous art.

1 Terry Eagleton, "Enjoy!" book review of Zizek's The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters, The Plague of Fantasies, and The Abyss of Freedom, London Review of Books, 27 November 1997.

2 Slavoj Zizek, The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality (London: Verso, 1994), 175.

3 Ibid,, 181.

4 Slavoj Zizek, "David Lynch, or, the Feminine Depression," Chapter 5 of The Metastases of Enjoyment,

114.For a similar account, see also Zizek's "The Lamella of David Lynch," in Reading Seminar XI:

Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, R. Feldstein, B. Fink, M. Jaanus (Albany: State
University of New York Press, 1995), 206.
5 See Toby Keeler's documentary Pretty as a Picture: The Art of David Lynch (1997), and "Ants in My

House," Chapter 9 from Lynch on Lynch, edited by C. Rodely (London: Faber and Faber; 1997), 217.
6 Slavoj Zizek, The Sublime Object of Ideology (London: Verso, 1989), 194.
7 Slavoj Zizek, The Plague of Fantasies (London: Verso, 1997), 66. For the question of beauty versus

the sublime, see also The Sublime Object of Ideology, 202-207.
8 Zizek's earlier analyses of good and evil in philosophy focused on Kant's notion of "radical Evil" as an

evil that "coincides with the Good," or "Evil as an ethical attitude." Slavoj Zizek, Tarrying with the
Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 46-47.
9 Zizek, The Plague of Fantasies, 49.
10 Zizek, The Sublime Object of Ideology, 198.
11 Eagleton, "Enjoy".
12 Slavoj Zizek, For they know not what they do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor (London: Verso,

1991), 272.
13 Ibid., 272. See also Jacob Torfing, New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe, and Zizek (Oxford:
Blackwell, 1999), 282.

14 Torfing, New Theories of Discourse, 283.

THE ART OF THE RIDICULOUS SUBLIME: On David Lynch's Lost Highway

Slavoj Zizek

The predominant critical response to David Lynch's Lost Highway was that it is a cold post-modern exercise in regressing to the scenes of primal anxieties as codified in the imagery of noir, with, as James Naremore put it succinctly, "no other purpose than regression. . . . Thus, for all its horror, sexiness, and formal brilliance, Lost Highway remains frozen in a kind of cinematheque and is just another movie about movies."' This reaction emphasizing the thoroughly artificial, "intertextual," ironically cliched nature of Lynch's universe -was, as a rule, accompanied by the opposite New Age reading, which focused on the flow of subconscious Life Energy that allegedly connects all events and runs through all scenes and persons, turning Lynch into the poet of a Jungian universal subconscious spiritualized Libido.2 Although this second reading is to be rejected (for reasons that will be elaborated later), it nonetheless scores a point against the notion of Lynch as the ultimate deconstructionist ironist in that it correctly insists that there is a level at which Lynch's universe is to be taken thoroughly seriously –the only problem is that it misperceives this level. Recall the final ecstatic rapture, after her brutal rape and murder, of Laura Palmer in Fire Walk with Me; or Eddy's outburst of rage against the driver on behalf of the need to follow the "fucking rules" in Lost Highway; or the often-quoted conversation in Blue Velvet between Jeffrey and Sandy, after Jeffrey returns from Dorothy's apartment, in the course of which Jeffrey, shattered and deeply disturbed, complains, "Why are there people like Frank? Why is there so much trouble in this world?" and Sandy responds by telling him of a good omen in her dream about robins who bring light and love to a dark world - in a paradigmatically post-modern way, these scenes are simultaneously comical, provoking laughter; unbearably naive; and yet to be taken thoroughly seriously." Their seriousness" does not signal a deeper spiritual level underlying superficial cliche's, but rather a crazy assertion of the redemptive value of naive clichés as such. This essay is an attempt to unravel the enigma of this coincidence of opposites, which is, in a way, the enigma of "postmodernity" itself.

1. The Inherent Transgression

Lenin liked to point out that one could often get crucial insights into one's own weaknesses from the perceptions of intelligent enemies. So, since the present essay attempts a Lacanian reading of David Lynch's Lost Highway, it may be useful to start with a reference to "post-theory," the recent cognitivist orientation of cinema studies that establishes its identity by a thorough rejection of Lacanian cinema studies. In what is arguably the best essay in Post-Theory, the volume that serves as a kind of manifesto to this orientation, Richard Maltby focuses on the well-known brief scene three quarters into Casablanca: 3 Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman) comes to Rick Blaine's (Humphrey Bogart's) room to try to obtain the letters of transit that will allow her and her Resistance-leader husband, victor Laszlo, to escape Casablanca to Portugal and then to America. After Rick refuses to hand them over, she pulls a gun and threatens him. He tells her, "Go ahead and shoot, you'll be doing me a favor." She breaks down and tearfully starts to tell him the story of why she left him in Paris. By the time she says, "If you knew how much I loved you, how much I still love you," they are embracing in close-up. The movie dissolves to a 3 ½ Second shot of the airport tower at night, its searchlight circling, and then dissolves back to a shot from outside the window of Rick's room, where he is standing, looking out, and smoking a cigarette. He turns into the room, and says, "And then?" She resumes her story.

The question that immediately pops up here, of course, is: what happened in between, during the 3 ½ Second shot of the airport - did they DO IT or not? Maltby is right to emphasize that, as to this point, the film is not simply ambiguous; it rather generates two very clear, although mutually exclusive meanings -they did it, and they didn't do it, i.e., the film gives unambiguous signals that they did it, and simultaneously unambiguous signals that they cannot have done it. On the one hand, a series of codified features signal that they did do it, i.e., that the 3 ½ Second shot stands for a longer period of time (the dissolve of the couple passionately embracing usually signals the act after the fade-out; the cigarette afterwards is also the standard signal of the relaxation after the act, not to mention the vulgar phallic connotation of the tower); on the other hand, a parallel series of features signals that they did NOT do it, i.e., that the 3 ½ Second shot of the airport tower corresponds to the real diegetic time (the bed in the background is undisturbed; the same conversation seems to go on without a break; etc.). Even when, in the final conversation between Rick and Laszlo at the airport, they directly touch the events of this night, their words can be read in both ways:

RICK: You said you knew about Ilsa and me?
VICTOR: Yes.
RICK: You didn't know she was at my place last night when you were...she came there for the letters of transit. Isn't that true, Ilsa?
ILSA: Yes.

RICK: She tried everything to get them aud nothing worked. She did her best to convince me that she was still in love with me. That was all over long ago; for your sake she pretended it wasn't and I let her pretend.

VICTOR: I understand..

Maltby's solution is to insist that this scene provides an exemplary case of how Casablanca "deliberately constructs itself in such a way as to offer distinct and alternative sources of pleasure to two people sitting next to each other in the same cinema," i.e., that it "could play to both 'innocent' and 'sophisticated' audiences alike."4 While, at the level of its surface narrative line, the film can be constructed by the spectator as obeying the strictest moral codes, it simultaneously offers to the "sophisticated" enough clues to construct an alternative, sexually much more daring narrative line. This strategy is more complex than it may appear: precisely BECAUSE you know that you are as it were "covered" or "absolved from guilty impulses"5 by the official story line, you are allowed to indulge in dirty fantasies; you know that these fantasies are not "for real," that they do not count in the eyes of the big Other. Our only correction to Maltby would be that we do not need two spectators sitting next to each other: one and the same spectator, split in itself, is sufficient.

To put it in Lacanian terms: during the infamous 3 ½ seconds, Ilsa and Rick did not do it for the big Other, the order of public appearance, but they did do it for our dirty fantasmatic imagination. This is the structure of inherent transgression at its purest, and Hollywood needs BOTH levels in order to function. To put it in terms of the discourse theory elaborated by Oswald Ducrot, we have here the opposition between presupposition and surmise: the presupposition of a statement is directly endorsed by the big Other; we are not responsible for it, while the responsibility for the surmise of a statement rests entirely on the reader's (or spectator's) shoulders. The author of the text can always claim, "It's not my responsibility if the spectators draw that dirty conclusion from the texture of the film!" And, to link this to psychoanalytic terms, this opposition is, of course, the Opposition between symbolic Law (Ego-Ideal) and obscene superego: at the level of the public symbolic Law; nothing happens, the text is clean, while, at another level, it bombards the spectator with the superego injunction, "Enjoy!" give way to your dirty imagination. To put it in yet another way, what we encounter here is a clear example of the fetishistic split, of the disavowal-structure of "Je sais bien, mais quand m.me . . . "The very awareness that they did not do it gives free rein to your dirty imagination; you can indulge in it because you are absolved from the guilt by the fact that, for the big Other, they definitely did NOT do it . . . And this double reading is not simply a compromise on the part of the Law, in the sense that the symbolic Law is interested only in keeping the appearances and leaves you free to exercise your dirty imagination, insofar as it does not encroach upon the public domain, i.e., insofar as it saves the appearances: the Law itself needs its obscene supplement; it is sustained by it, so it generates it.

So why do we need psychoanalysis here? What here is properly unconscious? Are the spectators not fully aware of the products of their dirty imagination? We can locate the need for psychoanalysis at a very precise point: what we are not aware of is not some deeply repressed secret content but the essential character of the appearance itself. Appearances DO matter: you can have your multiple dirty fantasies, but it matters which of them will be integrated into the public domain of the symbolic Law, of the big Other.

Maltby is thus right in emphasizing that the infamous Hollywood Production Code of the 30s and 40s was not simply a negative censorship code, but also a positive (productive, as Foucault would have put it) codification and regulation that generated the very excess whose direct depiction it hindered. Indicative here is the conversation between Josef von Sternberg and Joseph Breen reported by Maltby: When Sternberg said, "At this point, the two principals have a brief romantic interlude," Breen interrupted him: "What you're trying to say is that the two of them hopped into the hay. They fucked." The indignant Sternberg answered, "Mr. Breen, you offend me." Breen: "Oh, for Christ's sake, will you stop the horseshit and face the issue? We can help you make a story about adultery, if you want, but not if you keep calling a good screwing match a 'romantic interlude.' Now, what do these two people do? Kiss and go home?" "No," said Sternberg, "they fuck." "Good," yelped Breen, pounding the desk, "now I can understand your story." The director completed his outline, and Breen told him how he could handle it in such a way as to pass the code.6 So, the very prohibition, in order to function properly, has to rely on a clear awareness about what really did happen at the level of the prohibited narrative line: the Production Code did not simply prohibit some contents, it rather codified their cyphered articulation.

Maltby also quotes the famous instruction of Monroe Stahr to his scriptwriters from Scott Fitzgerald's The Last Tycoon:

> *At all times, at all moments when she is on the screen in our sight, she wants to sleep with Ken Willard. . . . Whatever she does, it is in place of sleeping with Ken Willard. If she walks down the street she is walking to sleep with Ken Willard, if she eats her food it is to give her enough strength to sleep with Ken Willard. But at no time do you give the impression that she would even consider sleeping with Ken Willard unless they were properly sanctified.*

We can see here how the fundamental prohibition, far from functioning in a merely negative way, is responsible for the excessive sexualization of the most common everyday events: everything the poor, starved heroine does, from walking down the street to having a meal, is transubstantiated into the expression of her desire to sleep with her man. We can see how the functioning of this fundamental prohibition is properly perverse, insofar as it unavoidably gets caught in the reflexive turn by means of which the very defense against the prohibited sexual content generates an excessive, all-pervasive sexualization - the role of censorship is much more ambiguous than it may appear.

The obvious reproach to this point would be that we are thereby inadvertently elevating the Hayes Production Code into a subversive machine more threatening to the system of domination than direct tolerance: are we not claiming that the more severe direct censorship is, the more subversive are the unintended by-products it generates? The way to answer this reproach is to emphasize that these unintended, perverse by-products, far from effectively threatening the system of symbolic domination, are its inherent transgression, i.e., its unacknowledged, obscene support.

So what happened after the dissolution of the Hayes Production Code? Exemplary of the way inherent transgression is operative in the post-Code era are recent films, The Bridges of Madison County and As Good As It Gets. What one should always bear in mind is that in The Bridges of Madison County (the film version of the novel) Francesca's adulterous affair effectively saves three marriages: her own (the memory of the four passionate days allows Francesca to endure the marriage with her boring husband), as well as the marriages of her two children who, shattered after reading her confession, reconcile themselves with their estranged partners. According to recent media reports, in China, where this film enjoyed a big success, even official ideologists praised it for its assertion of family values: Francesca remains with her family; she prefers her family duties to her love passion. Our first reaction to it is, of course, that the stupid bureaucratic Communist moralists missed the point: the movie is supposed to be tragic; Francesca missed her true life-fulfillment in love; her relationship with Kinkaid is what really matters to her. . . . However, at a deeper level, the Chinese moralist bureaucrats were right: the film IS an assertion of family values; the affair HAD to be broken off, adultery is just an inherent transgression which supports family.

With As Good As It Gets, things are even more paradoxical: isn't the point of the film that we are allowed to enjoy unconstrained political incorrectness for two hours because we know that the Jack Nicholson character has at the end a heart of gold and will turn good, i.e., renounce his wise-cracking? Here we have again the structure of inherent transgression, although today transgression is no longer the outbursts of subversive motifs repressed by the predominant patriarchal ideology (like the femme fatale in film noir), but the joyful immersion into non-PC, racist/sexist excesses prohibited by the predominant, liberal, tolerant regime. In short, the "bad" aspect is the repressed one. In the reversal of the logic of the femme fatale, where we are allowed to tolerate her undermining of patriarchy since we know that at the end she will pay the price, here we are allowed to enjoy Nicholson's non-PC excesses because we know that at the end he will be redeemed. The structure here is again that of the production of the couple: non-PC wise-cracking is Nicholson's object A, his surplus-enjoyment, and he has to renounce it in order to enter the straight heterosexual relationship. In this sense, the film tells a sad story of the betrayal of the proper (obsessional) ethical stance: when Nicholson gets "normalized" and turns into a warm human being, he loses what was his proper ethical stance and what also made him attractive: we get an ordinary boring couple.

2. The Feminine Act

When we are dealing with this structure of "inherent transgression," how is it possible to break out of it? By means of the ACT: an act is precisely that which disturbs the disavowed fantasmatic passionate attachment brought to light by the inherent transgression.8 Jacques-Alain Miller proposed as the definition of "a true woman" a certain radical ACT: the act of taking from man, her partner, of obliterating, destroying even, that which is "in him more than himself," that which "means everything to him" and to which he holds more than to his own life, the precious agalma around which his life turns.9 The exemplary figure of such an act in literature, of course, is that of Medea who, upon learning that Jason, her husband, plans to abandon her for a younger woman, kills their two young children, her husband's most precious possessions. It is in this horrible act of destroying that which matters most to her husband that she acts as une vraie femme, as Lacan put it. (Lacan's other example is that of Andre Gide's wife who, after his death, burned all his love letters to her, considered by him his most precious possessions.10)

Would it not also be possible to interpret the unique figure of the femme fatale in the new noir of the 90s along these lines, as exemplified by Linda Fiorentino in Dahl's *The Last Seduction*? In contrast to the classic noir femme fatale of the 40s who remains an elusive spectral presence, the new femme fatale is characterized by direct, outspoken, sexual aggressiveness, verbal and physical; by direct self-commodification and self-manipulation; by the "mind of a pimp in the body of a whore"; or, as they put it on the publicity poster for the film: "Most people have a dark side . . . she had nothing else." Two dialogues are here indicative: the classic exchange of double-entendres about a "speed limit" which finishes the first encounter of Barbara Stanwyck and Fred McMurray in Billy Wilder's Double Indemnity, and the first encounter of Linda Fiorentino with her partner in John Dahl's The Last Seduction, in which she directly opens up his fly, reaches into it, and inspects his merchandise (penis) before accepting him as a lover ("I never buy anything sight unseen")-and also later rejects any "warm human contact" with him.11 How does this brutal "self-commodification," this reduction of herself and her male partner to an object to be satisfied and exploited, affect the allegedly "subversive status of the femme fatale with regard to the paternal Law of Speech?

According to the standard feminist cinema theory, in classic noir the femme fatale is punished at the level of explicit narrative line; she is destroyed for being assertive and undermining the male patriarchal dominance, for presenting a threat to it: "the myth of the strong, sexually aggressive woman first allows sensuous expression of her dangerous power and its frightening results, and then destroys it, thus expressing repressed concerns of the female threat to male dominance."'2 The femme fatale thus "ultimately loses physical movement, influence over camera movement, and is often actually or symbolically imprisoned by composition as control over her is exerted and expressed visually, . . sometimes happy in the protection of a lover."'3 However; although

she is destroyed or domesticated, her image survives her physical destruction as the element which effectively dominates the scene. Therein, in the way the texture of the film belies and subverts its explicit narrative line, resides the subversive character of the noir films. In contrast to this classic noir; the neo-noir of the 80s and 90s, from Kasdan's Body Heat to The Last Seduction, openly, at the very level of explicit narrative, allows the femme fatale to triumph, to reduce her partner to a sucker condemned to death she survives rich and alone over his dead body. She does not survive as a spectral "undead" threat which libidinally dominates the scene even after her physical and social destruction; she triumphs directly, in social reality itself.

How does this affect the subversive edge of the femme fatale figure? Does the fact that her triumph is real not undermine her much stronger (one is even tempted to say: sublime) spectral/fantasmatic triumph, so that, instead of a spectral all-powerful threat, indestructible in her very physical destruction, she turns out to be just a vulgar, cold, manipulative "bitch" deprived of any aura? In other words, are we caught here in the dialectic of loss and sublimity in which empirical destruction is the price to be paid for spectral omnipotence? Perhaps, what one should do here is change the terms of the debate by first pointing out that, far from being simply a threat to the male patriarchal identity, the classic femme fatale functions as the "inherent transgression" of the patriarchal symbolic universe, as the male masochist-paranoiac fantasy of the exploitative and sexually insatiable woman who simultaneously dominates us and enjoys her suffering, provoking us violently to take her and to abuse her. (The fantasy of the all-powerful woman whose irresistible attraction presents a threat not only to male domination, but to the very identity of the male subject, is the "fundamental fantasy" against which the male symbolic identity defines and sustains itself) The threat of the femme fatale is thus a false one: it is effectively a fantasmatic support of patriarchal domination, the figure of the enemy engendered by the patriarchal system itself. In Judith Butler's terms, 14 the femme fatale is the fundamental disavowed "passionate attachment" of the modern male subject, a fantasmatic formation which is needed, but cannot be openly assumed, so that it can only be evoked on condition that, at the level of the explicit narrative line (standing for the public socio-symbolic sphere), she is punished, and the order of male domination is reasserted. Or, to put it in Foucauldian terms: in the same way that the discourse on sexuality, on its "repression" and regulation, creates sex as the mysterious, impenetrable entity to be conquered, the patriarchal erotic discourse creates the femme fatale as the inherent threat against which the male identity should assert itself. The neo-noir's achievement is to bring to light this underlying fantasy; the new femme fatale who fully accepts the male game of manipulation, and, as it were, beats him at his own game, is much more effective in threatening the paternal Law than the classic spectral femme fatale.

One can argue, of course, that this new femme fatale is no less hallucinatory,

that her direct approach to a man is no less the realization of a (masochist) male fantasy; however, what one should not forget is that the new femme fatale subverts the male fantasy precisely by way of directly and brutally realizing it, acting it out in "real life." It is thus not only that she realizes the male hallucination - she is fully aware that men hallucinate about such a direct approach - and that directly giving them what they hallucinate about is the most effective way to undermine their domination. In other words, what we have in the above-described scene from The Last Seduction is the exact feminine counterpart to the scene from Lynch's Wild at Heart in which Willem Defoe verbally abuses Laura Dern, forcing her to utter the words 'Fuck me!" And when she finally does it (i.e., when her fantasy is aroused), he treats this offer of hers as an authentic free offer and politely rejects it ("No, thanks, I've got to go, but maybe some other time. . ."). In both scenes, the subjects are humiliated when their fantasies are brutally externalized and thrown back at them.15 In short, Linda Fiorentino acts here as a true sadist, not only on account of her reduction of her partner to the bearer of partial objects which provide pleasure (thereby depriving the sexual act of its "human and emotional warmth" and transforming it into a cold physiological exercise), but also because of the cruel manipulation of the other's (male) fantasy which is directly acted out and thus thwarted in its efficiency as the support of desire.

Is this gesture of intentionally and brutally dropping the spectral aura of the traditional femme fatale not another version of the act of une vraie femme? Is not the object which is to her partner "more than himself," the treasure around -which his life turns, the femme fatale herself? By brutally destroying her spectral aura of "feminine mystery," by acting as a cold, manipulative subject interested only in raw sex, by reducing her partner to a partial object, the appendix to (and the bearer of) his penis, does she not also violently destroy what is "for him more than himself"? In short, Linda Fiorentino's message to her sucker-partner is: I know that, in wanting me, what you effectively want is the fantasmatic image of me, so I'll thwart your desire by directly gratifying it. In this way, you'll get me, but deprived of the fantasmatic support-background that made me an object of fascination. In contrast to the traditional femme fatale who, by eluding forever her partner's grasp, by remaining forever in half-shadow, and especially by her ultimate (self)destruction, sustains herself as the fantasmatic spectral entity, Linda Fiorentino's character does the exact opposite: she sacrifices/destroys not herself, but her fantasmatic image/support. In contrast to the classic femme fatale who is destroyed in reality in order to survive and triumph as the fantasmatic spectral entity, Linda Fiorentino's character survives in reality by sacrificing/destroying her fantasmatic support - or does she?

The enigma of this new femme fatale is that although, in contrast to the classic femme fatale, she is totally transparent (openly assuming the role of a calculating bitch, the perfect embodiment of what Baudrillard called the "transparency of Evil"), her enigma persists. Here we encounter the paradox discerned already by Hegel: sometimes, total self-exposure and self-transparency, i.e., the

awareness that there is no hidden content behind, make the subject even more enigmatic; Sometimes being totally outspoken is the most effective and cunning way of deceiving the other. For that reason, the neo-noir femme fatale continues to exert her irresistible seductive power on her poor partner - her strategy is one of deceiving him by openly telling the truth. The male partner is unable to accept this; he desperately clings to the conviction that, behind the cold manipulative surface, there must be a heart of gold to be saved, a person of warm human feeling, and that her cold manipulative approach is just a kind of defensive strategy. So, in the vein of Freud's well-known Jewish joke, 'Why are you telling me that you are going to Lemberg, when you are effectively going to Lemberg?,' the basic implicit reproach of the sucker-partner to the new femme fatale could be formulated as "Why do you act as if you are just a cold manipulative bitch, when you really are just a cold manipulative bitch?" Therein resides the fundamental ambiguity of Linda Fiorentino's character: her gesture does not quite fit the description of a true ethical act insofar as she is presented as a perfect demoniac being, as the subject with a diabolical will who is perfectly aware of what she is doing. She fully subjectivizes her acts, i.e., her Will is at the level of her wicked acts. Consequently, fantasy is not yet traversed in this universe of neo-noir. The femme fatale remains a male fantasy - the fantasy of encountering a perfect Subject in the guise of the absolutely corrupted woman who fully knows and wills what she is doing.

Linda Fiorentino's gesture thus nonetheless gets caught in the deadlock of the inherent transgression: ultimately, it follows the perverse scenario of directly enacting the fantasy. That is to say, the neo-noir-femme fatale is to be located in the context of the dissolution of the Hayes Production Code: what was merely hinted at in the late 40s is now explicitly rendered thematic. In neo-noir, sexual encounters are explicit in the way that they sometimes border on (soft) pornography (as in Kasdan's Body Heat); homosexuality, incest, sadomasochism, etc. are openly talked about and enacted, and the rule that evil characters are to be punished at the end is openly mocked and violated. Neo-noir directly stages the underlying fantasmatic content that was merely hinted at or implied in a codified way in the classic noir. Oliver Stone's neo-noir pastiche U-Turn, in which we see incest, a daughter killing her mother in order to seduce the father, etc., is emblematic here. Strangely, however, this direct transgression, this direct staging of underlying perverse fantasies, renders innocuous their subversive impact, and provides a new confirmation of the old Freudian thesis that perversion is not subversive, i.e., that there is nothing effectively subversive in the pervert's direct staging of disavowed fantasies.

3. Fantasy Decomposed

Both versions of the femme fatale the classic noir version as well as the post-modern version are thus flawed, caught in an ideological trap, and it is our contention that the way out of this trap is provided by David Lynch's Lost Highwayay, a film which effectively functions as a kind of meta-commentary on the opposition between the classic and post-modern noir femme fatale. This achievement of Lost Highway becomes perceptible if we compare it with Blue Velvet, Lynch's earlier masterpiece: in Blue Velvet, we pass from the hyper-realistically idyllic small-town life of Lumberton to its so-called dark underside, the nightmarishly-ridiculous obscene universe of kidnapping, sadomasochistic sex, violent homosexuality, murder, etc. In Lost Highway, on the contrary, the noir universe of corrupted women and obscene fathers, of murder and betrayal - the universe we enter after the mysterious identity change of Fred/Pete, the film's male hero - is confronted not with idyllic small-town life, but with the aseptic, grey, "alienated," suburban-megalopolis married life. So, instead of the standard opposition between hyper-realist idyllic surface and its nightmarish obverse, we get the opposition of two horrors: the fantasmatic horror of the nightmarish noir universe of perverse sex, betrayal and murder, and the (perhaps much more unsettling) despair of our drab, "alienated" daily life of impotence and distrust (an opposition somewhat similar to that in the first third of Hitchcock's Psycho, providing a unique picture of the grey drabness of modest lower middle-class secretarial life with its crushed dreams and its nightmarish supplement, the psychotic universe of the Bates Motel). It is as if the unity of our experience of reality sustained by fantasy disintegrates and decomposes into its two components: on the one side, the "desublimated" aseptic drabness of daily reality; on the other side, its fantasmatic support, not in its sublime version, but staged directly and brutally, in all its obscene cruelty. It is as if Lynch is telling us this is what your life is effectively about; if you traverse the fantasmatic screen that confers a fake aura on it, the choice is between bad and worse, between the aseptic impotent drabness of social reality and the fantasmatic Real of self-destructive violence.16 Here, then, is a brief outline of the plot.

Early in the morning, in an anonymous megalopolis not unlike Los Angeles, saxophonist Fred Madison hears on the intercom of his suburban house the mysterious, meaningless phrase "Dick Laurant is dead." When he goes to the entrance to see who spoke the message, he discovers on his doorstep a videocassette of his house, shot from the outside. The next morning, another videocassette is delivered with the footage of a track through his home, showing him asleep with his beautiful, but cold and restrained, brunette wife Renee. The Madisons call the police, who have no explanation. From their conversation, we learn that Fred is jealous of his wife, suspecting that she has affairs while he plays in a jazz club in the evenings. From their failed love-making, we also learn that Fred is half impotent, unable to satisfy Renee sexually. Renee takes Fred to a party thrown by Andy, a shady character, and Fred is accosted by a

pale, death-like Mystery Man, who claims not only that he has met Fred at his house, but also that he is there right now He produces a mobile phone so that Fred can confirm this by phoning home and talking to the Mystery Man who picks up the phone in his house, although he simultaneously stands by Fred at the party, So here we have a Mystery Man, not ET phoning home - a much more uncanny scene than Spielberg's. The next videotape shows Fred with the butchered bloody corpse of Renee in their bedroom. Convicted of his wife's murder, Fred suffers strange headaches and in prison transforms into another person entirely, a young mechanic named Pete Dayton.

Since Pete is obviously not the person who committed the murder, the authorities release him and return him to his parents. Pete picks up his life, meeting his girlfriend and working at a garage, where his privileged customer is Mr. Eddy, also known as Dick Laurant, a shady mobster full of exuberant life energy. Alice, Eddy's mistress, a blond reincarnation of Renee, seduces Pete and begins a passionate affair with him. Alice talks Pete into robbing Andy, who is an associate of Eddy's and also the man who lured her into prostitution and acting in pornographic films. Andy's house turns out to be one of the Lynchean places of Evil Pleasure (like the Red Lounge in "Twin Peaks": in its main room, a video continuously projected on the screen shows Alice copulating, taken from behind by a strong African-American man and painfully enjoying it. During the robbery, Andy is killed and transformed into one of Lynch's grotesquely immobilized corpses. Afterwards, Pete drives with Alice to a desert motel, where the two of them first passionately make love, and then, after whispering into his ear, "You'll never have me!" she disappears in the darkness into a wooden house, which burns in violent flames.17 Mr. Eddy (who was previously seen making love with Alice in a motel room) appears on the scene, gets in conflict with Pete (who now transforms back into Fred) and is executed by the Mystery Man, who also appears in the desert. Fred then returns to the city, delivering the message "Dick Laurant is dead" on the intercom of his own house, and drives again into the desert, with the police in hot pursuit.

This, of course, is a tentative and necessarily flawed synopsis of a complex narrative with numerous crucial details and events which do not make sense in the terms of real-life logic. Perhaps it is precisely this senseless complexity, this impression that we are drawn into a schizophrenic nightmarish delirium with no logic or rules (and that, consequently, we should abandon any attempt at a consistent interpretation and just let ourselves go to the inconsistent multitude of shocking scenes we are bombarded with), that is the film's ultimate lure to be resisted. Perhaps what one should distrust is precisely the claim of many a critic that Lost Highway is an over-complex, crazy film in which one searches in vain for a consistent plotline, since the line that separates reality from mad hallucination is blurred (the "who cares for the plot - it's the imagery and sound effects that matter!" attitude). In a first approach, one should absolutely insist that we are dealing with a real story (of the impotent husband, etc.) that, at some point (that of the slaughter of Renee), shifts into psychotic hallucination in which the hero reconstructs the parameters of the Oedipal triangle that

again make him potent - significantly, Pete turns back into Fred, i.e., we return to reality, precisely when, within the space of psychotic hallucination, the impossibility of the relationship reasserts it-self, when the blond Patricia Arquette (Alice) tells her young lover, "You'll never have me!"

Let us take as a cue the two sexual acts in Lost Highway, the first (silent, -aseptic, cold, half-impotent, "alienated") between Fred and Renee, the second (over-passionate) between Pete and Alice. It is crucial that they both end in failure for the man, the first directly (Renee patronizingly pats Fred on his shoulder), while the second ends with Alice eluding Pete and disappearing in the house, after she whispers into his ear, "You'll never have me!" Significantly, it is at this very point that Pete is transformed back into Fred, as if to assert that the fantasmatic way out was a false exit, that in all imaginable/possible universes, failure is what awaits us. It is against this background that one should also approach the notorious problem of the transformation of one person into another (of Fred into Pete, of Renee into Alice). If we are to avoid falling into New Age obscurantism or succumbing to the fashionable topic of Multiple Personality Disorder, the first thing to do is to take note of how this transformation is gendered in the film. One should oppose here two notions of doubles:

The traditional motif of two persons who, although they look alike, one the mirror image of the other, are not the same (only one of them possesses what Lacan calls *l'objet a*, the mysterious *je ne sais quoi* that inexplicably changes every-thing). In popular literature, the best-known version of it is Dumas' The Man in the Iron Mask: at the very top of the social edifice, the King (Louis XIV) has an identical twin brother, which is why he is imprisoned with an iron mask forever concealing his face. Since the imprisoned twin is the good one and the ruling King the bad one, the three musketeers, of course, realize the fantasmatic scenario of replacing on the throne the bad with the good brother, imprisoning the bad one... The opposite, more distinctly modern motif of two persons who, although they look entirely different, are effectively (two versions/embodiments of) one and the same person, since they both possess the same unfathomable objet a.

In Lost Highway, we find both versions, distributed along the axis of sexual difference: the two versions of the male hero (Fred and Pete) look different, but are somehow the same person, while the two versions of the woman (Renee and Alice) are obviously played by the same woman, but are two different personalities (in contrast to Bu.uel's Obscure Object of Desire in which two actresses play the same person).18 And this opposition perhaps provides the key to the film: first, we have the "normal" couple of impotent Fred and his reserved and (perhaps) unfaithful wife Renee, attractive but not fatal. After Fred kills her (or fantasizes about killing her), we are transposed into the noir universe with its Oedipal triangle: Fred's younger reincarnation is coupled with Alice, the sexually aggressive femme fatale reincarnation of Renee, with the additional figure of the obscene *Pere jouissance* (Eddy) intervening in-between the couple as the obstacle to their sexual commerce. The outburst of murderous violence is displaced accordingly: Fred slaughters the woman (his wife),

while Pete kills Mr. Eddy, the intruding Third. The relationship of the first couple (Fred and Renee) is doomed for inherent reasons (Fred's impotence and weakness in the face of his wife with whom he is ambiguously obsessed and traumatized), which is why, in the murderous passage . l'acte, he has to kill her; while with the second couple, the obstacle is external, which is why Fred kills Mr. Eddy, not Alice. (Significantly, the figure that remains the same in both universes is that of the Mystery Man.'9) The key point here is that, in this displacement from reality to fantasized noir universe, the status of the obstacle changes: while in the first part, the obstacle/failure is INHERENT (the sexual relationship simply doesn't work), in the second part, this inherent impossibility is EXTERNALIZED into the positive obstacle which from the outside prevents its actualization (Eddy). Isn't this move from inherent impossibility to external obstacle the very definition of fantasy, of the fantasmatic object in which the inherent deadlock acquires positive existence, with the implication that, with this obstacle cancelled, the relationship will run smoothly (like the displacement of the inherent social antagonism into the figure of the Jew in anti-Semitism)?

Patricia Arquette was therefore right when, in an effort to clarify the logic of the two roles she was playing, she produced the following frame of what goes on in the film: a man murders his wife because he thinks she's being unfaithful. He can't deal with the consequences of his actions and has a kind of breakdown in which he tries to imagine an alternative, better life for himself, i.e., he imagines himself as a younger virile guy, meeting a woman who wants him all the time instead of shutting him out, but even this imaginary life goes wrong - the mistrust and madness in him are so deep that even his fantasy fails apart and ends in a nightmare.20 The logic here is precisely that of Lacan's reading of Freud's dream, "Father, can't you see I'm burning?" in which the dreamer is awakened when the Real of the horror encountered in the dream (the dead son's reproach) is more horrible than the awakened reality itself, so that the dreamer escapes into reality in order to escape the Real encountered in the dream.21 The key for the confusing last fifteen minutes of the film is this gradual dissolution of the fantasy: when he still as the young Pete imagines his "true" wife Renee making love with Eddy in the mysterious room 26 of the motel, or when, later, he turns back into Fred, we are still in fantasy. So where does fantasy begin and reality end? The only consequent solution is: fantasy begins immediately after the murder, i.e., the scenes in the court and deathrow are already fantasized. The film then returns to reality with the other murder, with Fred killing Eddy and then running away on the highway, tailed by the police. However, such a direct psychoanalytic reading also has its limits. To put it in somewhat Stalinist terms, we should oppose both deviations, the rightist psycho-reductionist one (what occurs to Pete is just Fred's hallucination, in the same way the two corrupted elder servants are just the narrator's hallucination in Henry James's The Turn Of the Screw), as well as the leftist, anarchic-obscurantist, anti-theoretical insistence that one should renounce all interpretive effort and let ourselves go to the full ambiguity and richness of the

film's audio and visual texture -they are both worse, as Stalin would have put it. The naive Freudian reading is also in danger of slipping into obscurantist Jungian waters, conceiving all persons as mere projections/materializations of the different disavowed aspects of Fred's persona (Mystery Man is his destructive evil Will, etc.). Much more productive is to insist on how the very circular form of narrative in Lost Highway directly renders the circularity of the psychoanalytic process. That is to say, a crucial ingredient of Lynch's universe is a phrase, a signifying chain, which resonates as a Real that insists and always returns - a kind of basic formula that suspends and cuts across time: in Dune, it is "the sleeper must awake"; in "Twin Peaks," "the owls are not what they seem"; in Blue Velvet, "Daddy wants to fuck"; and, of course, in Lost Highway, the phrase which is the first and the last spoken words in the film, "Dick Laurant is dead," announcing the death of the obscene paternal figure (Mr. Eddy). The entire narrative of the film takes place in the suspension of time between these two moments. At the beginning, Fred hears these words on the intercom in his house; at the end, just before running away, he himself speaks them into the intercom. We have a circular situation: first a message which is heard but not understood by the hero, then the hero himself pronounces this message. In short, the whole film is based on the impossibility of the hero encountering himself, like in the time-warp scenes of science fiction novels where the hero, travelling back in time, encounters himself in an earlier time. On the other hand, do we not have here a situation like that in psychoanalysis, in which, at the beginning, the patient is troubled by some obscure, indecipherable, but insistent message (the symptom) which, as it were, bombards him from outside, and then, at the conclusion of the treatment, the patient is able to assume this message as his own, to pronounce it in the first person singular. The temporal loop that structures Lost Highway is thus the very loop of the psychoanalytic treatment in which, after a long detour, we return to our starting point from another perspective.

4. The Three Scenes

In a closer analysis, one should focus on the film's three most impressive scenes: Mr. Eddy's (Dick Laurant's) outburst of rage at the fellow driver; Fred's phone conversation with Mystery Man at the party; the scene in Andy's house in which Alice is confronted with the pornographic shot of herself copulating a tergo. Each of these scenes defines one of the three personalities to whom the hero relates: Dick Laurant as the excessive/obscene superego father, Mystery-Man as timeless/spaceless synchronous Knowledge, Alice as the fantasy-screen of excessive enjoyment.

In the first scene, Eddy takes Pete for a ride in his expensive Mercedes to detect what is wrong with the car. When a guy in an ordinary car overtakes them unfairly, Eddy pushes him off the road with his more powerful Mercedes, and then gives him a lesson: with his two thuggish body-guards, he threatens the scared-stiff, ordinary guy with a gun and then lets him go, furiously shouting at him to "learn the fucking rules." It is crucial not to misread this scene whose shockingly-comical character can easily deceive us: one should risk taking the figure of Eddy thoroughly seriously, as someone who is desperately trying to maintain a minimum of order, to enforce some elementary "fucking rules" in this otherwise crazy universe.24 Along these lines, one is even tempted to rehabilitate the ridiculously obscene figure of Frank in Blue Velvet as the obscene enforcer of the Rules. Figures like Eddy (in Lost Highway), Frank (in Blue Velvet), Bobby Peru (in Wild at Heart), or even Baron Harkonnen (in Dune), are the figures of an excessive, exuberant assertion and enjoyment of life; they are somehow evil "beyond good and evil." Yet Eddy and Frank are at the same time the enforcers of the fundamental respect for the socio-symbolic Law. Therein resides their paradox: they are not obeyed as an authentic paternal authority; they are physically hyperactive, hectic, exaggerated and as such already inherently ridiculous - in Lynch's films, the law is enforced through the ridiculous, hyperactive, life-enjoying agent. This brings us to the more general point of what is to be taken seriously and what is to be taken ironically in Lynch's universe. It is already one of the critical commonplaces about Lynch that the excessive figures of Evil - these ridiculous enraged paternal figures whose wild outbursts of violent rage cannot but appear ludicrously impotent and whose exemplary cases are Frank in Blue Velvet and Eddy in Lost Highway cannot be taken quite seriously; they are ridiculous impotent caricatures, a kind of evil counterpart to the immersions into ethereal bliss (like Sandy's famous monologue about robins in Blue Velvet or the last shot in Fire Walk with Me of Laura Palmer's ecstatic and redemptive smile), which are also self-deprecating ironic exercises. Against this commonplace, one is tempted to assert the absolute necessity of taking these excessive figures absolutely seriously. To put it in Jamesonian dialectical terms: of course, the Evil in Lynch is no longer the non-mediated, opaque, impenetrable, substantial force that resists our grasp, it is thoroughly "mediated," reflexivized, and composed of ludicrous cliche's; however; the unique charm of Lynch's films resides in the way this global re-

flexivization generates its own "immediacy" and naiveté'.

§ The second scene occurs when Renee takes Fred to a party thrown by Andy, a shady character. Fred is accosted there by a pale, death-like Mystery Man, who claims to have met Fred at his house, and that he is there right now. This Mystery Man (Robert Blake) is, rather obviously, the ultimate embodiment of Evil, the darkest, most destructive and "toxic" aspect or strata of our unconscious; however, one should be precise here about his status. The obvious Kafkaesque connotation of his self-presentation to Fred here is crucial: at Fred's question, "How did you get into my house?" he answers, "You invited me. It's not my habit to go where I'm not wanted." This obviously echoes the Priest's emphasis to Josef K. in The Trial that "the Court makes no claims upon you. It receives you when you come and it relinquishes you when you go." This, however, in no way entails that the Mystery Man is, in the Jungian mode, the externalization-projection of the disavowed murderous aspect of Fred's personality, immediately realizing his most destructive impulses; he is, prior to that, the fantasmatic figure of a pure and wholly neutral medium-observer, a blank screen which "objectively" registers Fred's unacknowledged fantasmatic urges. His timelessness and spacelessness (he can he at two places at the same time, as he proves to Fred in the nightmarish phone conversation scene) signals the timelessness and spacelessness of the synchronous universal symbolic network of registration. One should refer here to the Freudian-Lacanian notion of the "fundamental fantasy." as the subject's innermost kernel, as the ultimate, proto-transcendental framework of my desiring which, precisely as such, remains inaccessible to my subjective grasp. The paradox of the fundamental fantasy is that the very kernel of my subjectivity, the scheme that guarantees the unique-ness of my subjective universe, is inaccessible to me: the moment I approach it too much, my subjectivity, my self-experience, loses its consistency and disintegrates. Against this background, one should conceive of the Mystery Alan as the ultimate horror of the Other who has a direct access to our (the subject's) fundamental fantasy; his impossible/real gaze is not the gaze of the scientist who fully knows what I am objectively (like the scientist who knows my genome), but the gaze able to discern the most intimate, subjective kernel inaccessible to the subject himself. This is what his grotesquely pale death-mask signals: we are dealing with a being in whom Evil coincides with the uttermost innocence of a cold, disinterested gaze. As a being of asexualized, childishly neutral Knowledge, the Mystery Man belongs to the same category as Mr. Memory in Hitchcock's 39 Steps: the key feature is that they both form a couple with an obscene/violent paternal figure (Dick Laurant in Lost Highway, the chief of the German spy ring in 39 Steps): the obscene Pere-jouissance, standing for excessive, exuberant Life and pure, asexual Knowledge are two strictly complementary figures.

§ The third scene occurs in Andy's house when, in its central hall, Alice is standing opposite the large screen on which an unending and repetitive pornographic scene is continuously projected showing her penetrated (anally?) from behind, with a face displaying pleasure in pain. This confrontation of the

real Alice with her interface fantasmatic double produces the effect of "This is not Alice," like that of "This is not a pipe" in the famous Magritte painting - the scene in which a real person is shown side by side with the ultimate image of what she is in the fantasy of the male Other, in this case, enjoying being buggered by a large anonymous black man ("A woman is being buggered" functions here somehow like Freud's "A child is being beaten.") Is this house of pornography the last in a series of hellish places in Lynch's films, places in which one encounters the final (not truth but) fantasmatic lie (the other two best known are the Red Lodge in "Twin Peaks" and Frank's apartment in Blue Velvet)? This site is that of the fundamental fantasy staging the primordial scene of jouissance, and the whole problem is how to "traverse" it, to acquire a distance from it. And, again, this side by side confrontation of the real person with her fantasmatic image seems to condense the overall structure of the film that posits aseptic, drab, everyday reality alongside the fantasmatic Real of a nightmarish jouissance. (The musical accompaniment here is also crucial: the German "totalitarian" punk band Rammstein renders the universe of the utmost jouissance sustained by obscene superego injunction.)

The two parts of the film are thus to be opposed as social reality (sustained by the dialectic of the symbolic Law and desire) and fantasy. Fred desires insofar as "desire is the desire of the Other," i.e., he desires, perplexed by Renee 's obscure desire, interpreting it endlessly, trying to fathom "what does she want?" After the passage into fantasy, her new incarnation (Alice) is aggressively active -she seduces him and tells him what she wants - like a fantasy which provides an answer to the "Che vuoi?" ("What does the Other want from me?"). By this direct confrontation of the reality of desire with fantasy, Lynch DECOMPOSES the ordinary "sense of reality" sustained by fantasy into, on the one side, pure, aseptic reality and, on the other side, fantasy: reality and fantasy no longer relate vertically (fantasy beneath reality, sustaining it), but horizontally (side by side). The ultimate proof that fantasy sustains our sense of reality" is provided by the surprising difference between the two parts of the film: the first part (reality deprived of fantasy) is "depthless," dark, almost surreal, strangely abstract, colorless, lacking substantial density, and as enigmatic as a Magritte painting, with the actors acting almost as in a Beckett or Ionesco play, moving around as alienated automata. Paradoxically, it is in the second part, the staged fantasy, that we get a much stronger and fuller "sense of reality," of depth of sounds and smells, of people moving around in a "real world."

It is this decomposition that ultimately accounts for the unique effect of extraneation" that pervades Lynch's films, often associated with the sensibility of Edward Hopper's paintings; however, the difference between "extraneation" in Hopper's paintings and in Lynch's films is the very difference between modernism and postmodernism. While Hopper also "extraneates common everyday scenes, in his paintings - the lone persons staring through the open windows into the empty blue sky or sitting at a table in a night bar or a grey office are "transubstantiated" into figurations of the modern existential angst, displaying loneliness and the inability to communicate - this dimension is totally

lacking in Lynch, in whose work the extraneation of everyday life has a magic redemptive quality. Let us take one of the supreme examples of this extraneation, the strange scene from Fire Walk with Me in which Gordon Cole of the FBI (played by Lynch himself) instructs Agent Desmond and his partner Sam using the grotesque body of a feminine figure he refers to as Lil. Lil (whose face is covered with theatrical white and who wears a patently artificial red wig and a cartoon-like red dressto which is pinned an artificial blue rose) performs a series of exaggerated theatrical gestures, which Desmond and Sam decode as they go to work on the case. Is this uncanny staging really to be read as expressing Cole's inability to communicate properly (signaled also by his inability to hear and need to shout), which is why he can only get his message through by reducing the feminine body to a cartoon-like two-dimensional puppet performing ridiculous gestures?27 Doesn't such a reading miss the properly Kafkaesque quality of this scene, in which the two detectives accept this strange instruction as something normal, as part of their daily communication?

This example should make it clear that it is crucial to resist the temptation to project onto Lynch the standard New Age opposition between a superficial social life with its cliched rules, and the underlying subconscious flow of Life Energy to which we must learn to surrender ourselves because only if we abandon willful self-control and "let ourselves go," can we achieve true spiritual maturity and inner peace. This approach culminates in the reading of Lynch as a New Age dualistic gnostic whose universe is the battlefield between two opposed hidden spiritual forces, the force of destructive darkness (embodied in evil figures like Bob in "Twin Peaks") and the opposing force of spiritual calm and beatitude. Such a reading is justified insofar as it implicitly rejects the interpretation of Lost Highway as a new version of the arch-conservative warning against delving too far behind appearances: do not go too far, do not try to penetrate the horror that lurks behind the fragile order in which we live, since you will burn your fingers and the price you will pay will be much higher than you think... (In short, this interpretation discovers in Lost Highway the old conservative message of Mozart's Cosi fan tutte: yes, trust women, believe them, but nonetheless do not expose them to too much temptation. If you succumb to the temptation and go to the end, you will find yourself running on the "lost highway" with no possible return.) In turning around the standard cliche' about how Lynch takes the risk of penetrating the dark side of the soul, of confronting the destructive vortex of the irrational forces that dwell beneath the surface of our superficially regulated daily lives, the gnostic New Age reading endeavors to demonstrate, in a more optimistic twist, that this vortex is nonetheless not the ultimate reality: beneath it, there is the domain of pure, peaceful, spiritual Rapture and Beatitude.

Lynch's universe is effectively the universe of the "ridiculous sublime":

the most ridiculously pathetic scenes (angels' apparitions at the end of Fire Walk with Me and Wild at Heart, the dream about robins in Blue Velvet) are to be taken seriously. However, as we have already emphasized, one should also take seriously the ridiculously excessive violent "evil" figures (Frank in Velvet,

Eddy in Lost Highway, Baron Harkonnen in Dune). Even a repulsive figure like Bobby Peru in Wild at Heart stands for an excessive phallic "life power," for an unconditional Life-Assertion; as Michel Chion points out, when he merrily shoots himself, he is in its entirety a gigantic phallus, with his head as the phallus's head.28 So it is much too easy to oppose, along the lines of gnostic dualism, the maternal-receptive aspect of Lynchean male heroes (their "letting go" to the subconscious maternal/feminine energy) to their violent aggressive Will: Paul Atreides in Dune is both at the same time, i.e., his proto-totalitarian warrior leadership which leads him to ground the new Empire is sustained precisely by drawing energy from passively "letting himself go," from being led by the cosmic energy of Spice. Excessive "phallic" violence and passive submission to a Higher Global Force are strictly correlative, two aspects of the same stance. Along the same lines, in the first violent scene in Wild at Heart, when Sailor beats to death the African-American hired to kill him, he "lets himself go" to his rage, to his raw energy of "fire walking with him," and the point is precisely that one cannot simply oppose this violent "subconscious" to the good one in Hegelese, one should assert their speculative identity. Doesn't Lynch's ultimate message reside therein, as in "Twin Peaks," where Bob (Evil itself) is identical to the "good" family father?

5. Canned Hatred

Another way to break out of this impasse of New Age reading is to approach the emergence of the multiple personalities in Lost Highway (Fred and Pete, Renee and Alice) against the background of the limit of the "psychological unity" of the human person: at a certain level, to perceive the subject as the psychological unity of a person is wrong. Here we encounter the problem of the "psychologically convincing" status of the story as a form of resistance against its subversive thrust: when Someone complains that characters in a story are not "psychologically convincing," one should always become attentive to the ideological censorship operative in this dismissal.25 The fate of Mozart's Cosi fan tutte is paradigmatic, with its "ridiculous" (for the psychological sensibilities of the nineteenth century) plot of two young gentlemen subjecting their fiancees to an exquisitely staged ordeal: they pretend to depart for military maneuvers and then return to seduce them (each to the other's fiancee), dressed up as Albanian officers, Two features of this opera plot were unbearable to Romantic sensibilities: the girls were so dumb that neither recognized her lover's best friend in the foreigner passionately seducing her, and authentic love was aroused in both in a purely mechanical way within the span of a single day. In order to save the divine Mozart's music from the constraints of such a vulgar plot (so the cliche' established by Beethoven goes), they concocted a series of strategies: from writing an entirely new libretto to the same music, to changes in the narrative content (say, at the end, it is disclosed that the two unfortunate girls knew all the time about this preposterous deception they just pretended to be duped by it in order all the more effectively to embarrass their lovers at the moment of the final revelation). One of such changes practiced even in some recent stagings is to change the ending so that the two couples are again reunited, but not the same couples -in this way, psychology is saved, i.e., the deception is psychologically justified by the fact that the two couples are mismatched at the beginning: subconsciously, they were already in love "diagonally," and the ridiculous masquerade is thus merely a means that allows the true amorous link to be brought to light. The uncanny specter of the automatic, "mechanical" production of our innermost feelings is again successfully kept at bay.

The proof a contrario of the limitation of the "psychological" approach is the dismal failure of Costa-Gavras's anti-KKK melodrama Betrayed, the story of an undercover FBI agent (Debra Winger) who falls in love with a Bible Belt farmer (Tom Berenger) suspected of being part of a secret racist organization killing African-American and white liberals. Costa-Gavras has chosen here the opposite way of John Dahl in The Last Seduction (where the femme fatale is thoroughly "diabolically evil ," i.e., intentionally evil and fully enjoying it); he desperately tried to "avoid cliche's" by not painting the KKK group as brutal redneck thugs, but as warm characters, capable of authentic love and compassion in their private lives, and displaying true group solidarity (recall the scene around the campfire); no wonder, then, that true love emerges between

Winger and Berenger, and, towards the film's end, she is truly traumatized when she is compelled to shoot him dead. This act of hers is even staged as a kind of betrayal of his trust: he counts on her, presuming that, because of her love, she will not be able to shoot. Far from explaining the racist acts of the KKK members as part of their "psychologically complex personalities," this reversal of the so-called "vulgar, flat cliche's" turns out no better than the direct, caricatured image of dumb rednecks: inexplicably, apart from being quite nice and warm people, they also like, from time to time, to lynch blacks in an extremely cruel way. .

Even worse is Spielberg's failure to represent the Nazi evil in Schindler's List. There are scenes in some art films made by great European directors which are the ultimate in pretentious bluff, like the one with dozens of couples copulating in the hot red-yellow dust of Death Valley in Antonioni's Zabriskie Point -such scenes are ideology at its worst. Although many a critic praised it as the strongest scene in Schindler's List, the commercial cinema's counterpoint to such pretentiousness is the scene that condenses all that is false in Spielberg: the supreme, "Oscar-winning" performance by Ralph Fiennes, the scene, of course, in which the commander of the concentration camp confronts a beautiful Jewish girl, his prisoner. We listen to his long quasi-theatrical monologue, while the terrified girl just silently stares in front of her, totally immobilized by mortal fear. His desire is torn, since, on the one hand, she attracts him sexually, but, on the other hand, he finds her unacceptable as his love object due to her Jewish origins - a clear exemplification of the Lacanian formula S-a, of the confrontation of the divided subject with the object-cause of his desire. The scene is usually described as the battle between his common erotic humanity and his racist prejudices; at the end, the racist hatred wins the day and he casts off the girl. So what is so thoroughly false about this scene? The tension of the scene allegedly consists in the radical incommensurability of the two subjective perspectives: what for him is a light-hearted flirt with the idea of a brief sexual affair, is for her a question of life and death. More precisely, we see the girl as an utterly terrified human being, while the man is not even directly addressing her, but rather treating her as an object, a pretext for his loud monologue. However, what is wrong with this scene is the fact that it presents a (psychologically) impossible position of enunciation of its subject, i.e., that it renders his split attitude towards the terrified Jewish girl as his direct psychological self experience. The only way correctly to render this split would be to stage the scene (the confrontation with the Jewish girl) in a Brechtian way, with the actor playing the Nazi villain directly addressing the public: "I, the commander of the concentration camp, find this girl sexually very attractive; I can do with my prisoners whatever I want, so I can rape her with impunity. However, I am also impregnated by the racist ideology which tells me that Jews are filthy and unworthy of my attention. So I do not know how to decide...."

The falsity of Schindler's List is thus the same as the falsity of those who seek the clue to the horrors of Nazism in the "psychological profiles" of Hitler and other Nazi figures (or of those who analyze the pathology of Stalin's personal

development in order to find a clue to the Stalinist Terror). Here, Hannah Arendt was right in her otherwise problematic thesis on the "banality of Evil": if we take Adolf Eichmann as a psychological entity, a person, we discover nothing monstrous about him; he was just an average bureaucrat, i.e., his "psychological profile" gives us no clue to the horrors he executed. Along the same lines, it is totally misleading to investigate the psychic traumas and oscillation of the camp commander in the way Spielberg does. Here, we encounter the problem of the relationship between social and individual pathology at its most urgent.

The first thing to do, of course, is to draw a clear line of separation between the two levels. The Stalinist system DID function as a perverse machine, but it is wrong to conclude from this that the individual Stalinists were mostly perverts; this general designation of how Stalinism qua politico-ideological edifice was structured tells us nothing about the psychic economy of Stalinist individuals - they could have been perverts, hysterics, paranoiacs, obsessionals, etc. However, although it is legitimate to characterize the social libidinal economy of the Stalinist ideologico-political edifice (autonomously from individual psychic profiles of the Stalinists as perverse), we should nonetheless avoid the opposite trap, which resides in conferring on this social level a kind of Durkheimian autonomy of the "objective Spirit" existing and functioning independently of individuals determined by it. The ultimate reality is NOT the gap between subjective pathologies and the "objective" pathology inscribed into the ideologico-political system itself: what the direct assertion of this gap leaves unexplained is how the "objective" system, independent of subjective psychic fluctuations, is accepted by the subjects as such. That is to say, one should always bear in mind that the difference between "subjective" pathologies and the libidinal economy of the "objective" ideological system is ultimately something inherent to the subject(s): there is an "objective" socio-symbolic system only insofar as subjects treat it as such.

It is this enigma that Lacan's notion of the "big Other" addresses: the "big Other" is the dimension of non-psychological, social, symbolic relations treated as such by the subject - in short, the dimension of symbolic INSTITUTION. Say, when a subject encounters a judge, he knows very well how to distinguish between the subjective features of the judge as a person and the "objective" institutional authority he is endowed with insofar as he is a judge. This gap is the gap between my words when I utter them as a private person and my words when I utter them as someone endowed with the authority of an Institution, so that it is the Institution that speaks through me. Lacan is here no Durkheimian: he opposes any reification of the Institution, i.e., he knows very well that the Institution is here only as the performative effect of the subject's activity, The Institution exists only when subjects believe in it, or, rather, act (in their social interactivity) AS IF they believe in it. So we can well have a perverse global politico-ideological system and individuals who, in the way they relate to this system, display hysteric, paranoiac, etc., features.

Along these lines, one can clearly see why the thesis of the indifference of

Nazi executioners (they were not propelled by pathological hatred, but by cold-blooded, indifferent, bureaucratic efficiency) contained in the Arendt notion of the "banality of Evil" is insufficient: the intense hatred which is no longer psychologically experienced by the subjects is transposed onto (or materialized/embodied in) the "objective" ideological system which legitimizes their activity; they can afford to be indifferent, since it is the "objective" ideological apparatus itself that "hates" on their behalf. This notion of an "objectivized" personal experience which releases the subject from the charge of effectively having to experience and assume the libidinal stance of the ideology he follows is crucial for the understand mg of how "totalitarian" systems function - we are dealing here with a phenomenon which, in a strict homology to that of canned laughter, one is tempted to call canned hatred. The Nazi executioner acting as a cold bureaucrat, indifferent to the plight of his victims, was not unlike the subject who can maintain a tired indifference towards the comedy he is watching, while the TV set, through its soundtrack, performs the laughter for him, on his behalf (or, in a Marxist reading of commodity fetishism, the bourgeois individual who can afford to be, in his subjective self-experience, a rationalist utilitarian - the fetishism is displaced onto the commodities themselves).30 The key to the Lacanian solution to the problem of the relationship between subjective libidinal experience and the libidinal economy embodied in the objective symbolic order, the "big Other," is that the gap between the two is original and constitutive: there is no primordial direct self-experience which is then, in a secondary move, "reified" or objectivized in the working of the symbolic order. The subject himself emerges through such a displacement of his innermost self-experience onto the "reified" symbolic order. This is one of the ways to read the Lacanian mathem of the subject, the "barred subject," $: what empties the subject is the fact of being deprived of his innermost fantasmatic kernel which is transposed onto the "reified" big Other. Because of this, there is no subject without the minimally "reified" symbolic institution.

6. Fathers, Fathers Everywhere

Much better in rendering the horror of the Holocaust is another scene from Schindler's List, the one in which we see Jewish children trying to find a hiding place (in closets, even in toilets) from the Nazi thugs who are already searching houses in the ghetto. The scene is shot in an easy-going way, as depicting children's games, accompanied by light orchestral music typical of the scenes in a William Wyler film that introduce an idealized American small-town life. In this way, the very contrast between the appearance of the children's game of hide-and-seek and the impending horror makes the tension of the scene unbearable. It is in this direction that one should search for the answer to the question: How to stage the Holocaust in cinema? Roberto Benigni's Life Is Beautiful provides a unique solution: when an Italian Jewish father is arrested and sent to Auschwitz with his young son, he adopts a desperate strategy of shielding his son from the trauma by presenting what goes on as a staged competition in which one must stick to the rules (e.g., eat as little as possible) - those who win the most points will at the end see an American tank arriving. (Thus the father translates into Italian the orders shouted by the brutal German guard as instructions on how to play the game.) The miracle of the film is that the father succeeds in maintaining the appearance to the end: even when, just before the liberation of the camp by the Allies, he is led away by a German soldier to be shot, he winks at his son (hidden in a nearby closet) and starts to march a goose-step in a comically exaggerated way, as if he is playing a game with the soldier.

Perhaps the key scene of the film occurs when the child gets tired of the game which involves so many deprivations of camp life (lack of food, the necessity of hiding for hours) and announces to the father that he wants to leave for home. Unperturbed, the father agrees, but then, with feigned indifference, mentions to the son how glad their competitors will be if they leave now, when they are in the lead with so many points over the others - in short, he deftly introduces and manipulates the dimension of the other's desire, so that, when, finally, close to the doors, the father says to the son, "OK, let's go, I cannot wait for you all day!" the son changes his mind and asks him to stay. Of course, the tension of the situation is created by the fact that we, the spectators, are well aware that the father's offer to go home is a false choice, a pure bluff: if they were effectively to step out, the son (who is hiding in the barracks) would be immediately killed in the gas chamber. Therein resides the fundamental function of the protective father: under the guise of offering a (false) choice, to make the subject-son freely choose the inevitable through the competitive evocation of the other's desire.

Far from being vulgar, this film is, in its very comical aspect, much more appropriate to the Holocaust topic than pseudo-serious attempts *a la* Schindler's List, making it clear how so-called human dignity relies on the urgent need to maintain a minimum of protective appearance: are not all fathers doing some-

thing similar to us, although under less dramatic circumstances? That is to say, one should not forget that Benigni's protective father nonetheless accomplishes the work of symbolic castration: he effectively separates the son from his mother, introduces him to the dialectical identification with the Other's (his peer's) desire, and thus accustoms him to the cruel reality of life outside the family. The fantasmatic protective shield is merely a benevolent fiction allowing the son to come to terms with harsh reality. The father does NOT protect the son from the harsh reality of the camp, he just provides the symbolic fiction that renders this reality bearable. And is this not, perhaps, the father's main function? If we "become mature" precisely when we no longer need such a protective appearance, we in a sense NEVER become effectively "mature": we just displace the shield of the protective appearance at a different, more "abstract," level. In today's times, obsessed with "unmasking the false appearances" (from the traditional leftist critique of the ideological hypocrisy of morality or power, to American TV on which individuals in talk shows publicly disclose their innermost secrets and fantasies), it is touching to see such a pageant of the benevolent power of appearance. The only thing that is problematic here is the allegorical relationship between the film's narrative and the way the film itself addresses its spectator: is it not that Benigni, the director of the film, treats the spectators in the same way that the father within the Benigni film constructs a protective fictional shield to render the traumatic reality of the concentration camp bearable? That is to say, doesn't he treat the spectators as children to be protected from the horror of the holocaust by a "crazy" sentimental and funny fiction of a father saving his son, the fiction that renders the historical reality of the Holocaust somehow bearable?

As such, Benigni's film should be opposed to another recent film that presents the paternal figure as the monstrous rapist of his children: Thomas Vinterberg's Celebration (Denmark, 1998), in which the obscene father, far from protecting the children from trauma, is the very cause of the trauma. In one case, we have a father assuming an almost maternal protective role, a father who relies on pure appearance, knitting a protective web of fictions for his son, a kind of ersatz-placebo. In the other case, we have the father at whose core there is the Real of the unconstrained violence: after we dismantle all protective fictions that surround him, we see him as what he is, the brutal jouisseur. Celebration is outstanding in its depiction of the precise status of authority: at the beginning of the film, the father, after being interrupted in the midst of telling a dirty joke to his son complains that there is no respect for him. Likewise, towards the film's end, the situation finally explodes, and the appearance (of the polite dinner ritual) is broken, when, after his daughter reads publicly the suicide letter of her sister, raped by the father, the father demands a glass of wine for him and for his daughter in order to celebrate a toast to her nice speech, and then, when no one moves, he starts to shout, complaining about the lack of respect. THIS is respect at its purest: respect for the figure of authority even when he is disrespectful, embarrassing, obscene. The other important lesson of the film is how difficult it is to effectively interrupt the ritual

that sustains the appearance: even after repeated embarrassing disclosures of the father's crime years ago, the dinner ritual of "manners" PERSISTS - what persists here is not the Real of a trauma that returns and resists symbolization, but the symbolic ritual itself. In short, the ultimate version of the film would be that the gathered company would consider the son's desperate (yet calmly spoken) accusation of his father for raping him and his sister as just what it pretended to be, a common celebratory toast, and would go on with the festivity...

There are, however, problems with the film. It is crucial here to avoid the trap of conceiving these two opposed poles (Benigni's protective father and Vinterberg's obscene father) along the axis of appearance versus reality, as if the opposition is that of the pure appearance (the protective maternal father) versus the Real of the violent rapist that becomes visible once we tear down the false appearance. Celebration tells a lot about how today, with False Memory (of being molested by one's parents) Syndrome, the spectral figure of the Freudian Urvater, sexually possessing everyone around him, is resuscitated - it tells a lot precisely on account of its artificial character. That is to say, a simple, sensitive look at Celebration tells us that there is something wrong and faked about all this pseudo-Freudian stuff of "demystifying the bourgeois paternal authority," of rendering visible its obscene underside: today, such a "demystification" sounds and is false; it more and more functions as a post-modern pastiche of "the good old times" in which it was still possible to really experience such "traumas." Why? We are not dealing here with the opposition between the appearance (of a benevolent, protective father) and the cruel reality (of the brutal rapist) that becomes visible once we demystify the appearance; it is, on the contrary, this horrible secret of a brutal father behind the polite mask which is itself a fantasmatic construction.

The recent impasse with Binjamin Wilkomirski's Fragments points in the same direction: what everyone assumed to be authentic blurred memories of the author who, as a three- or four-year-old child was imprisoned in Majdanek, turned out to be a literary fiction invented by the author. Apart from the standard question of literary manipulation, are we aware to what extent this "fake" reveals the fantasmatic investment and jouissance operative in even the most painful and extreme conditions? The enigma is the following one: usually, we generate fantasies as a kind of shield to protect us from the unbearable trauma; here, however, the very ultimate traumatic experience, that of the Holocaust, is fantasized as a shield- from what? Such monstrous apparitions are "returns in the Real" of the failed symbolic authority: the reverse of the decline of paternal authority, of the father as the embodiment of the symbolic Law, is the emergence of the rape-enjoying father of the False Memory Syndrome. This figure of the obscene rapist father, far from being the Real beneath the respectful appearance, is rather itself a fantasy formation, a protective shield - against what? Is the rapist father from the False Memory Syndrome not, in spite of his horrifying features, the ultimate guarantee that there is somewhere full, unconstrained enjoyment? And, consequently, what if the true horror is

the lack of enjoyment itself?

What these two fathers (Benigni's and Vinterberg's) have in common is that they both suspend the agency of the symbolic Law/Prohibition, i.e., the paternal agency whose function is to introduce the child into the universe of social reality with its harsh demands, to which the child is exposed without any maternal protective shield: Benigni's father offers the imaginary shield against the traumatic encounter of social reality, while Vinterberg's rapist father is also a father outside the constraints of the (symbolic) Law, enjoying access to full enjoyment. These two fathers thus fit the Lacanian opposition between the Imaginary and the Real: Benigni's as protector of an imaginary safety, against Vinterberg's as a definition of the brutality of the Real of lawless violence. What is missing is the father as the bearer of symbolic authority, the Name of the Father, the prohibitory "castrating" agency that enables the subject's entry into the symbolic order, and thus into the domain of desire. The two fathers, imaginary and real, are what is left over once the paternal symbolic authority disintegrates.

What happens with the operation of the symbolic order when the symbolic Law loses its efficiency, when it no longer properly functions? What we get are strangely de-realized or, rather, de-psychologized subjects, as if we were dealing with robotic puppets that obey a strange, blind mechanism, somewhat like the way they shoot soap operas in Mexico: because of the extremely tight schedule (each day the studio has to produce a half-hour installment of the series), actors do not have time to learn their lines in advance; they simply have hidden in their ears a tiny voice receiver, and a man in a cabin behind the set reads to them the instructions on what they are to do (what words they are to say, what acts they are to accomplish); actors are trained to enact immediately, with no delay, these instructions.

7. The End of Psychology

This is the ultimate paradox we should bear in mind: today's prevailing "psychologization" of social life (the deluge of psychological manuals from Dale Carnegie to John Gray, which all endeavor to convince us that the path to happy life is to be sought within us, in our psychic maturation and self-discovery; the Oprah Winfrey-style public confessions; the way politicians themselves render public their private traumas and concerns to justify political decisions) is the mask (or mode of appearance) of its exact opposite, of the growing disintegration of the proper "psychological" dimension of authentic self-experience. "Persons" that we encounter are, more and more, experienced as individuals talking like puppets who repeat a prerecorded message. Recall the New Age preacher telling us to rediscover our true Self: is it not that the very style of his words - the style of repeating, like an automaton, learned phrases contradicts his message? This accounts for the properly uncanny effect of the New Age preachers: it is as if, beneath their kind and open stance, there lurks some unspeakably monstrous dimension.

Another aspect of the same process is the blurred line of separation between private and public in political discourse. When, in April 1999, the German defense minister Rudolph Scharping tried to justify the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, he did not present his stance as grounded in a clear, cold decision, but went deep into rendering public his inner turmoil, openly evoking his doubts and his moral dilemmas apropos of this difficult decision. If this tendency catches on, we shall no longer have politicians who, in public, speak the cold, impersonal, official language, following the ritual of public declarations, but share with the public their inner turmoil and doubts in a unique display of "sincerity." Here, however, the mystery begins: one would expect this "sincere" sharing of private dilemmas to act as a counter-measure to the predominant cynicism of those in power. Is not the ultimate cynic a politician who, in his public discourse, speaks the impersonal, dignified language of high politics, while privately; he entertains a distance towards his statements, well aware of particular pragmatic considerations that lay behind these public statements of high principle? However, a closer look soon reveals that the "sincere" expression of inner turmoil is the ultimate, highest form of cynicism. Impersonal, "dignified," public speech counts on the gap between public and private; we are well aware that, when a politician speaks in an official tone, he speaks as the stand-in for the Institution, not as a psychological individual (i.e., the Institution speaks through him), and therefore nobody expects him to be "sincere" since that is simply not the point (in the same way a judge who passes a sentence is not expected to be "sincere," but simply to follow and apply the law, whatever his sentiments). On the other hand, the public sharing of inner turmoil, the coincidence between public and private, even and especially when it is psycho-logically "sincere," is cynical - not because such a public display of private doubts and uncertainties is faked, concealing true privacy: what this display conceals is the objective socio-political and ideological dimension of the

policies or decisions under discussion. The more this display is psychologically "sincere,' the more it is "objectively" cynical in that it mystifies the true social meaning and effect of these policies or decisions.

Another example from contemporary cinema can help us to clarify this point further. How are we to account for the success of Spielberg's Saving Private Ryan? As it was emphasized by Colin MacCabe, the film's apparently anti-militaristic, brutal depiction of a bloodbath and the horror of war must be read against the background of what is arguably the ultimate lesson of recent American military interventions, especially Operation Desert Fox against Iraq at the end of 1998, an operation that "signaled a new era in military history": the military must now fight "battles in which the attacking force operates under the constraint that it can sustain no casualties."31 (The same point is repeated in every U.S. discussion about military intervention abroad, from Somalia to ex-Yugoslavia; the public expects a guarantee that there will be no casualties.) Indeed, wasn't the perfect counterpoint the almost surreal way CNN reported the war? Not only was it presented as a TV event, but the Iraqis themselves seemed to treat it this way during the day, Baghdad was a "normal" city, with people going around and following their business, as if war and bombardment were an unreal nightmarish specter that occurred only during the night and did not take place in effective reality.

However, this tendency to erase death itself from war should not seduce us into endorsing the standard notion that war is made less traumatic if it is no longer experienced by the soldiers (or presented) as an actual encounter with another human being to be killed, but as an abstract activity in front of a screen or behind a gun far from the explosion, like guiding a missile on a warship hundreds of miles away from where it will hit its target. While such a procedure makes the soldier less guilty, it is open to question if it effectively causes less anxiety - one way to explain the strange fact that soldiers often fantasize about killing the enemy soldier in a face-to-face confrontation, looking him in the eyes before stabbing him with a bayonet (in a kind of military version of the sexual False Memory Syndrome, they even often "remember" such encounters when they never took place). There is a long literary tradition of elevating such face-to-face encounters as an authentic war experience (see the writings of Ernst J.nger, who praised them in his memoirs of the trench attacks in World War I). So, what if the truly traumatic feature is NOT the awareness that I am killing another human being (to be obliterated through the "dehumanization" and "objectification" of war into a technical procedure), but, on the contrary, this very "objectification," which then generates the need to supplement it by the fantasies of authentic personal encounters with the enemy? It is thus not the fantasy of a purely aseptic war run as a video game behind computer screens that protects us from the reality of the face-to-face killing of another person. It is, on the contrary, this fantasy of a bloody and fatal face-to-face encounter with an enemy that we construct in order to escape the Real of the depersonalized war turned into an anonymous technological apparatus. Let us recall what went on in the final American assault on the Iraqi lines during

the Gulf War: no photos, no reports, just rumors that tanks with bulldozers like shields in front of them rolled over Iraqi trenches, simply burying thou-sands of troops in earth and sand. What went on was allegedly considered too cruel in its sheer mechanical efficiency, too different from the standard notion of an heroic face-to-face combat, so that images would perturb public opinion too greatly, and a total censorship black-out was strictly imposed. Here we have the two aspects joined together: the new notion of war as a purely technological event, taking place behind radar and computer screens, with no casualties, AND extreme physical cruelty too unbearable for the gaze of the media - not crippled children and raped women, victims of caricaturized local ethnic "fundamentalist warlords," but thousands of nameless soldiers, victims of efficient technological warfare. When Baudrillard made the claim that the Gulf War did not take place, this statement could also be read in the sense that such traumatic pictures that represent the Real of this war were totally censored.

Our thesis should be clear now: Spielberg's Saving Private Ryan relates to the notion of a virtualized war with no casualties in precisely the same way Celebration relates to Benigni's Life is Beautiful: in both cases, we are NOT dealing with the symbolic fiction (of virtual, bloodless warfare, of protective narrative) concealing the Real of senseless bloodbath or sexual violence - in both cases, it is rather this violence itself which already serves as a fantasized protective shield. Therein resides one of the fundamental lessons of psychoanalysis: the images of utter catastrophe, far from giving access to the Real, can function as a protective shield AGAINST the Real. In sex as well as in politics, we take refuge in catastrophic scenarios in order to avoid the actual deadlock (of the impossibility of sexual relationship, of social antagonism). In short, the true horror is not the rapist Urvater against which the benevolent maternal father protects us with his fantasy shield, but the benign maternal father himself - the truly suffocating and psychosis-generating experience for the child would have been to have a father like Benigni, who, with his protective care, erases all traces of the excessive surplus-enjoyment. It is as a desperate defense measure against THIS father that one fantasizes about the rapist father. And, back to David Lynch: does exactly the same not hold for the paternal figures of excessive enjoyment in his films? Aren't these figures, in their very comic horror, also fantasmatic defense formations - not the threat, but the defense against the true threat? It is also against this background of the ideology of "psychologically convincing" characters that one should appreciate Lynch's paradigmatic procedure of what one is tempted to call the spiritual transubstantiation of common cliche's. As Fred Pfeil demonstrates in his close analysis of a dialogue between Jeffrey and Sandy's policeman father from the end of Blue Velvet, 32 each sentence in it is a cliche' from a B-movie, spoken with the naive earnestness of a B-movie actor, yet somehow the immediacy of these cliche's is lost, sublimated into pseudo-metaphysical depth, something resembling the paradigmatic procedure in early Godard, say, in Le M.pris, the film which comes closest to a big studio commercial production (recall the scene from the very beginning in which the naked Brigitte Bardot asks her husband [Piccoli] repetitively what is it in

her that he loves: does he love her ankles, her thighs, her breasts, her eyes, her ears . . .) 33

The overall effect of this return to clich.d na.vet. is, again, that persons are strangely de-realized or, rather, de-psychologized, as in the above-mentioned example of the Mexican soap operas: is the conversation about robins between Jeffrey and Sandy in Blue Velvet not acted as if it were shot under the conditions of these soap operas? It is as if, in Lynch's universe, the psychological unity of a person disintegrates into, on the one hand, a series of cliche's, of uncannily ritualized behavior, and, on the other hand, outbursts of the "raw," brutal, desublimated Real of an unbearably intensive, (self)destructive, psychic energy. The key to this effect of de-realization is that, as we have already seen, Lynch puts aseptic, quotidian social reality alongside its fantasmatic supplement, the dark universe of forbidden masochistic pleasures. He transposes the vertical into the horizontal and puts the two dimensions - reality and its fantasmatic supplement, surface and its "repressed" - on the same surface. The very structure of Lost Highway thus renders the logic of inherent transgression: the second part of the movie (the proper noir triangle) is the fantasmatic inherent transgression of the drab, everyday life depicted in the first part.

This displacement of the vertical into the horizontal brings about a further unexpected result: it explodes the very consistency of the film's fantasmatic background. The ambiguity of what goes on in the film's narrative (Are Renee and Alice one and the same woman? Is the inserted story just Fred's hallucination? Or is it a kind of flash- back, so that the intersected noir part provides the rationale for the killing? Or is this flash-back itself imagined to provide post-festum a false rationale for the killing whose true cause is hurt male pride due to an inability to satisfy the woman?) is ultimately the very ambiguity and inconsistency of the fantasmatic framework which underlies the noir universe.34 It is often claimed that Lynch throws into our (the spectators') face the underlying fantasies of the noir universe - in-deed, but he simultaneously renders visible the INCONSISTENCY of this fantasmatic support as well. The two main alternative readings of Lost Highway can thus be interpreted as akin to the dream-logic in which you can "have your cake and eat it too," like in the "Tea or coffee? Yes, please!" joke: you first dream about eating it, then about having/possessing it, since dreams do not know contradiction. The dreamer resolves a contradiction by staging two exclusive situations one after the other; in the same way, in Lost Highway, the woman (the brunette Arquette) is destroyed/killed/punished, and the same woman (the blond Arquette) eludes the male grasp and triumphantly disappears.

8. Cyberspace Between Perversion and Trauma

An even more appropriate parallel would be the one between this coexistence of multiple fantasmatic narratives and the cyberspace notion of hypertext. Lynch is often designated as a perverse author par excellence, and is not cyberspace, especially virtual reality, the realm of perversion at its purest? Reduced to its elementary skeleton, perversion can be seen as a defense against the Real of death and sexuality, against the threat of mortality as well as the contingent imposition of sexual difference. What the perverse scenario enacts is a "disavowal of castration," a universe in which, as in cartoons, a human being can survive any catastrophe; in which adult sexuality is reduced to a childish game; in which one is not forced to die or to choose one of the two sexes. As such, the pervert's universe is the universe of the pure symbolic order, of the signifier's game running its course, unencumbered by the Real of human finitude.35 So, again, doesn't our experience of cyberspace perfectly fit this perverse universe? Isn't cyberspace also a universe without closure, unencumbered by the inertia of the Real, constrained only by its self-imposed rules? In this comic universe, as in a perverse ritual, the same gestures and scenes are endlessly repeated, without any final closure. In this universe, the refusal of a closure, far from signaling the undermining of ideology, rather enacts a proto-ideological denial: The refusal of closure is always, at some level, a refusal to face mortality. Our fixation on electronic games and stories is in part an enactment of this denial of death. They offer us the chance to erase memory, to start over, to replay an event and try for a different resolution. In this respect, electronic media have the advantage of enacting a deeply comic vision of life, a vision of retrievable mistakes and open options.35

The final alternative with which cyberspace confronts us is thus: are we necessarily immersed in cyberspace in the mode of the imbecilic superego compulsion-to-repeat, in the mode of the immersion into the "undead," perverse universe of cartoons in which there is no death, in which the game goes on indefinitely? Or is it possible to practice a different modality of relating to cyberspace in which this imbecilic immersion is perturbed by the "tragic" dimension of the real/ impossible?

There are two standard uses of cyberspace narrative: the linear, single-path maze adventure, and the undetermined, "post-modern" hypertext form of rhizome fiction. The single-path maze adventure moves the interactor towards a single solution within the structure of a win-lose contest (overcoming the enemy, finding the way out, etc.). With all possible complications and detours, the overall path is clearly predetermined; all roads lead to one final Goal. In contrast, the hypertext rhizome does not privilege any order of reading or interpretation; there is no ultimate overview or "cognitive mapping," no possibility to unify the dispersed fragments in a coherent encompassing narrative framework. One is ineluctably enticed in conflicting directions; we, the interactors, just have to accept that we are lost in the inconsistent complexity of

multiple referrals and connections. The paradox is that this ultimately helpless confusion, this lack of final orientation, far from causing an unbearable anxiety, is oddly reassuring: the very lack of a final point of closure serves as a kind of denial which protects us from confronting the trauma of our finitude, of the fact that our story has to end at some point. There is no ultimate, irreversible point, since, in this multiple universe, there are always other paths to explore, alternate realities in which one can take refuge when one seems to reach a deadlock. So how are we to escape this false alternative? Janet Murray refers to the story structure of the "violence-hub," similar to the famous *Rashomon* predicament: an account of some violent or otherwise traumatic incident (a Sunday trip fatality, a suicide, a rape) is placed at the center of a web of narratives/files that explore it from multiple points of view (perpetrator, victim, witness, survivor, investigator):

> *The proliferation of interconnected files is an attempt to answer the perennial and ultimately unanswerable question of why this incident happened. . . These violence-hub stories do not have a single solution like the adventure maze or a refusal of solution like the post-modern stories; instead, they combine a clear sense of story structure with a multiplicity of meaningful plots. The navigation of the labyrinth is like pacing the floor; a physical manifestation of the effort to come to terms with the trauma, it represents the mind's repeated efforts to keep returning to a shocking event in an effort to absorb it and, finally, get past it.*

It is easy to perceive the crucial difference between this "retracing of the situation from different perspectives" and the rhizomatic hypertext: the endlessly repeated reenactments refer to the trauma of some impossible Real which forever resists its symbolization (all these different narratives are ultimately just so many failures to cope with this trauma, with the contingent abyssal occurrence of some catastrophic Real, like suicide, apropos of which no "why" can ever serve as its sufficient explanation). In a later closer elaboration, Murray even proposes two different versions of presenting a traumatic suicidal occurrence, apart from such a texture of different perspectives. The first is to transpose us into the labyrinth of the subject's mind just prior to his suicide. The structure is here hypertextual and interactive, we are free to choose different options, to pursue the subject's ruminations in a multitude of directions, but whichever direction or link we choose, we sooner or later end up with the blank screen of the suicide. So, in a way, our very freedom to pursue different venues imitates the tragic self-closure of the subject's mind. No matter how desperately we look for a solution, we are compelled to acknowledge that there is no way out, that the final outcome will always be the same. The second version is the opposite one. We, the interactors, are put in the situation of a kind of "lesser god," having at our disposal a limited power of intervention into the life-story of the subject doomed to kill himself; for example, we can "rewrite" the subject's past so that his girlfriend would not have left him, or so that he would not have failed the crucial exam, yet whatever we do, the outcome is the same - even God him-

self cannot change Destiny. . . (We find a version of this same closure in a series of alternative history sci-fi stories, in which the hero intervenes in the past in order to prevent some catastrophic event from occurring, yet the unexpected result of his intervention is an even worse catastrophe, like Stephen Fry's Making History, in which a scientist intervenes in the past, making Hitler's father impotent just prior to Hitler's conception, so that Hitler is not born. As one can expect, the result of this intervention is that another German officer of aristocratic origins takes over the role of Hitler, develops the atomic bomb in time, and wins World War II.)

9. The Future Antérieur in the History of Art

In a closer historical analysis, it is crucial not to conceive this narrative procedure of the multiple-perspective encircling of an impossible Real as a direct result of cyberspace technology. Technology and ideology are inextricably intertwined; ideology is inscribed already in the very technological features of cyberspace. More precisely, what we are dealing with here is yet another example of the well-known phenomenon of the old artistic forms pushing against their own boundaries and using procedures which, at least from our retrospective view, seem to point towards a new technology that will be able to serve as a more natural" and appropriate "objective correlative" to the life-experience the old forms endeavored to render by means of their "excessive" experimentations. A whole series of narrative procedures in nineteenth-century novels announce not only the standard narrative cinema (the intricate use of "flashback" in Emily Bront. or of "cross-cutting" and "close-ups" in Dickens), but sometimes even the modernist cinema (the use of off-space" in Madame Bovary) as if a new perception of life were already here, but was still struggling to find its proper means of articulation until it finally found it in cinema. What we have here is thus the historicity of a kind of futur antérieur (future perfect): it is only when cinema arrived and developed its standard procedures that we could really grasp the narrative logic of Dickens's great novels or of Madame Bovary.

Today we are approaching a homologous threshold: a new "life experience is in the air, a perception of life that explodes the form of the linear centered narrative and renders life as a multiform flow. Even in the domain of "hard" sciences (quantum physics and its Multiple Reality interpretation, or the utter contingency that provided the spin to the actual evolution of life on Earth - as Stephen Jay Gould demonstrated in his Wonderful Life, 38 the fossils of Burgess Shale bear witness to how evolution may have taken a wholly different turn), we seem to be haunted by the randomness of life and alternate versions of reality. Either life is experienced as a series of multiple, parallel destinies that interact and are crucially affected by meaningless, contingent encounters, the points at which one series intersects with and intervenes into another (see Altman's Shortcuts), or different versions/outcomes of the same plot are repeatedly enacted (the "parallel universes" or "alternative possible worlds" scenarios - see Kieslowski's Chance, Veronique and Red). Even some serious" historians themselves recently produced the volume Virtual History, reading crucial modern era events, from Cromwell's victory over the Stuarts and the American war of independence, to the disintegration of Communism, as hinging on unpredictable and sometimes even improbable chances 39. This perception of our reality as one of the possible - often not even the most probable - outcomes of an "open" situation, this notion that other possible outcomes are not simply cancelled out but continue to haunt our "true" reality as a specter of what might have happened, conferring on our reality the status of extreme fragility and contingency, implicitly clashes with the predominant "linear" narrative forms of our literature and cinema - it seems to call for a new artistic

medium in which it would not be an eccentric excess, but its "proper" mode of functioning. One can argue that the cyberspace hypertext is this new medium in which this life experience will find its "natural," more appropriate objective correlative, so that, again, it is only with the advent of cyberspace hypertext that we can grasp what Altman and Kieslowski were aiming at.

Are not the ultimate examples of this kind of futur antérieur Brecht's (in) famous "learning plays," especially The Measure Taken, often dismissed as the justification of Stalinist purges?40 Although the "learning plays" are usually conceived as an intermediary phenomenon, the passage between Brecht's early carnivalesque plays critical of bourgeois society and his late "mature" epic theater, it is crucial to recall that, just before his death, when asked which of his works effectively augurs the "drama of the future," Brecht instantly answered, The Measure Taken. As Brecht emphasized again and again, The Measure Taken is ideally to be performed without the observing public, just with the actors repeatedly playing all the roles and thus "learning" the different subject-positions. Do we not have here an anticipation of the "immersive participation" of cyberspace, in which actors engage in "educational" collective role-playing? What Brecht was aiming at is immersive participation that, nonetheless, avoids the trap of emotional identification. we immerse ourselves at the "meaningless," "mechanical" level of what, in Foucauldian terms, one is tempted to call "revolutionary disciplinary micro-practices," while at the same time critically observing our behavior. Does this not also point to a possible "educational" use of participatory cyberspace role-playing games in which, by way of repeatedly enacting different versions/outcomes of the same basic predicament, one can become aware of the ideological presuppositions and surmises that unknowingly guide our daily behavior? Do not Brecht's three versions of his first great "learning play," Der Jasager, effectively present us with such hypertext /alternate reality experiences?

In the first version, the boy "freely accepts the necessary," subjecting himself to the old custom of being thrown into the valley; in the second version, the boy refuses to die, rationally demonstrating the futility of the old custom; in the third version, the boy accepts his death, but on rational grounds, not out of respect for mere tradition. So when Brecht emphasizes that, by participating in the situation staged by his "learning plays," actors/agents themselves have to change, progressing towards a different subjective stance, he effectively points towards what Murray adequately calls "enactment as a transformational experiences." This is what Lynch does in Lost Highway: he "traverses" the fantasmatic universe of noir, not by way of direct social criticism (depicting a grim social reality behind it), but by staging its fantasies openly, more directly, i.e., without the "secondary perlaboration" which masks their inconsistencies. The final conclusion to be drawn is that "reality," and the experience of its density, is sustained not simply by A/ONE fantasy, but by an INCONSISTENT MULTITUDE of fantasies; this multitude generates the effect of the impenetrable density that we experience as "reality." This, then, is the ultimate answer to those New Age-inclined reviewers who insisted that Lost Highway moves at a

more fundamental psychic level (at the level closer to the universe of "primitive" civilizations, of reincarnation, of double identities, of being reborn as a different person, etc.) than that of the unconscious fantasizing of a single subject. Against this "multiple reality" talk, one should thus insist on a different aspect, on the fact that the fantasmatic support of reality is in itself necessarily multiple and inconsistent.

10 Constructing the Fundamental Fantasy

The strategy of "traversing the fantasy" in cyberspace can even be "operationalized" in a much more precise way. Let us for a moment return to Brecht's three versions of Der Jasager: these three versions seem to exhaust all possible variations of the matrix provided by the basic situation (perhaps with the inclusion of the fourth version, in which a boy rejects his death not for rational reasons, as unnecessary, but out of pure egotistic fear - not to mention the uncanny fifth version in which the boy "irrationally" endorses his death even when the "old custom" does NOT ask him to do it). However, already at the level of a discerning, "intuitive" reading, we can feel that the three versions are not at the same level. It is as if the first version renders the underlying traumatic core (the "death-drive" situation of willingly endorsing one's radical self-erasure), and the other two versions in a way react to this trauma, "domesticating" it, displacing/translating it into more acceptable terms, so that, if we were to see just one of these two latter versions, the proper psychoanalytic reading of them would justify the claim that these two versions present a displaced/transformed variation of some more fundamental fantasmatic scenario. Along the same lines, one can easily imagine how, when we are haunted by some fantasmatic scenario, externalizing it in cyberspace enables us to acquire a minimum of distance towards it, i.e., to subject it to a manipulation which will generate other variations of the same matrix. Once we exhaust all main narrative possibilities, once we are confronted with the closed matrix of all possible permutations of the basic matrix underlying the explicit scenario we started with, we are bound to generate also the underlying "fundamental fantasy" in its undistorted, "non-sublimated," embarrassingly outright form, i.e., not yet displaced, or obfuscated by "secondary perlaborations": The experience of the underlying fantasy coming to the surface is not merely an exhaustion of narrative possibilities; it is more like the solution to a constructivist puzzle. . . . When every variation of the situation has been played out, as in the final season of a long-running series, the underlying fantasy comes to the surface.... Robbed of the elaboration of sublimation, the fantasy is too bold and unrealistic, like the child carrying the mother up to bed. The suppressed fantasy has a tremendous emotional charge, but once its energy has saturated the story pattern, it loses its tension.43

Is this "losing the tension" of the fundamental fantasy not another way to say that the subject traversed this fantasy? Of course, as Freud emphasized apropos of the fundamental fantasy, "My father is beating me," underlying the explicit scene, "A child is being beaten," that haunts the subject, this fundamental fantasy is a pure retroactive construction, since it was never present to the consciousness and then repressed. 44 Although it plays a pro to-transcendental role, providing the ultimate coordinates of the subject's experience of reality, the subject is never able to fully assume/subjectivize in the first person singular, and precisely as such, it can be generated by the procedure of "mechani-

cal" variation on the explicit fantasies that haunt and fascinate the subject. To evoke Freud's other standard example, endeavoring to display how pathological male jealousy involves an unacknowledged homosexual desire for the male partner with whom I think my wife is cheating me: we arrive at the underlying statement, "I LOVE him," by manipulating/ permutating the explicit statement of my obsession: "I HATE him (because I love my wife whom he seduced)."45 We can see, now, how the purely virtual, nonactual universe of cyberspace can "touch the Real": the Real we are talking about is not the "raw" pre-symbolic Real of "nature in itself," but the spectral hard core of "psychic reality" itself. When Lacan equates the Real with what Freud calls "psychic reality," this "psychic reality" is not simply the inner psychic life of dreams, wishes, etc., as opposed to the perceived external reality, but the hard core of the primordial "passionate attachments," which are real in the precise sense of resisting the movement of symbolization and/or dialectical mediation:

The expression "psychical reality" itself is not simply synonymous with "internal world," "psychological domain," etc. If taken in the most basic sense that it has for Freud, this expression denotes a nucleus within that domain which is heterogeneous and resistant and which is alone in being truly "real" as compared with the majority of psychical phenomena.46

The "Real" upon which cyberspace encroaches is thus the disavowed fantasmatic "passionate attachment," the traumatic scene which not only never took place in "real life," but was never even consciously fantasized. Isn't the digital universe of cyberspace the ideal medium in which to construct such pure semblances which, although they are nothing "in themselves," pure presuppositions, provide the coordinates of our entire experience? It may appear that the impossible Real is to be opposed to the virtual domain of symbolic fictions: is the Real not the traumatic kernel of the Same against whose threat we seek refuge in the multitude of virtual symbolic universes? However, our ultimate lesson is that the Real is simultaneously the exact opposite of such a non-virtual, hard core: a purely virtual entity, an entity which has no positive ontological consistency - its contours can only be discerned as the absent cause of the distortions/displacements of the symbolic space. In this way, cyberspace, with its capacity to externalize our innermost fantasies in all their inconsistency, opens up to artistic practice a unique possibility to stage, to "act out," the fantasmatic support of our existence, up to the fundamental "sadomasochistic" fantasy that can never be subjectivized. We are thus invited to risk the most radical experience imaginable: the encounter with the Other Scene that stages the foreclosed hard core of the subject's Being. Far from enslaving us to these fantasies and thus turning us into desubjectivized blind puppets, it enables us to treat them in a playful way and thus to adopt towards them a minimum of distance.

Peter Hoeg's science-fiction novel, The Woman and the Ape, stages sex with an animal as a fantasy of a full sexual relationship, and it is crucial that "the animal" is considered, as a rule, male: in contrast to cyborg-sex fantasy, in which "the cyborg" is, as a rule, a woman, i.e., in which the fantasy is that of a Woman-Machine (Blade Runner), the animal is a male ape copulating with a

human woman and fully satisfying her. Does this not materialize two standard, vulgar notions: that of a woman who wants a strong animal partner, a "beast," not a hysterical, impotent weakling, and that of a man who wants his feminine partner to be a perfectly-programmed doll, meeting all his wishes, not an effective, living being? The underlying "fundamental fantasy" implied by these two scenes is, of course, none other than the unbearable scene of the "ideal couple" (a male ape copulating with a female cyborg). By displaying the two fantasies side by side in hypertext, the space is thus open for the third, underlying fundamental fantasy to emerge. Lynch does something of the same order when he throws us into the universe in which different, mutually exclusive fantasies co-exist. He thereby also encircles the contours of the space that the spectator has to fill in with the excluded fundamental fantasy. Does he not, then, in a way compel us to imagine a male ape copulating with a female cyborg - in the most efficient way to undermine the hold this fantasy exerts over us? In "Le prix du progres," one of the fragments that conclude The Dialectic of Enlightenment, Adorno and Horkheimer quote the argumentation of the nineteenth-century French physiologist Pierre Flourens against medical anesthesia with chloroform: Flourens claims that it can be proven that the anaesthetic works only on our memory's neuronal network. In short, while we are butchered alive on the operating table, we fully feel the terrible pain, but later, after awakening, we do not remember it. For Adorno and Horkheimer, this, of course, is the perfect metaphor of the fate of Reason based on the repression of nature in itself: the body, the part of nature in the subject, fully feels the pain; it is only that, due to repression, the subject does not remember it. Therein resides the perfect revenge of nature for our domination over it: unknowingly, we are our own greatest victims, butchering ourselves alive. However, is it not also possible to read this scene as the perfect staging of the inaccessible Other Site of the fundamental fantasy that can never be fully subjectivized, assumed by the subject? And are we not here in Lynch territory at its purest?

After the release of Eraserhead, his first film, a strange rumor began to circulate to account for its traumatic impact: At the time, it was rumored that an ultra-low frequency drone in the film's soundtrack affected the viewer's subconscious mind. People said that although inaudible, this noise caused a feeling of unease, even nausea. This was over ten years ago. Looking back on it now, one could say that David Lynch's first feature- length film was such an intense experience audio-visually that people needed to invent explanations... even to the point of hearing inaudible noises.47

The status of this voice that no one can perceive, but which nonetheless dominates us and produces material effects (feelings of unease and nausea), is real-impossible: it is the voice which the subject cannot hear because it is uttered in the Other Site of the fundamental fantasy - and is not Lynch's entire work an endeavor to bring the spectator "to the point of hearing inaudible noises" and thus to confront the comic horror of the fundamental fantasy?

1 James Naremore, More Than Night (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 275.

2 See, as an exemplary Case of this approach, Martha P. Nochimson, The Passion of David Lynch (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997).

3 See Richard Maltby, "'A Brief Romantic Interlude': Dick and Jane go to 3 ½ Seconds of the Classic Hollywood Cinema," in Post-Theory, edited by David Bordwell and Noel Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 434-459.

4 Maltby, "A Brief Romantic Interlude," 443.

5 Ibid., 441.

6 Ibid., 445.

7 Francis Scott Fitzgerald, The Last Tycoon (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), 51.

8 The attitude of moral wisdom paradigmatically rendered in proverbs or in the great French tradition of moralists from La Rochefoucauld onwards is the very opposite of the act: the so-called maxims of wisdom Consist in an endless variation on how it is catastrophic to remain faithful to one's desire and how the only way to be happy is to learn to compromise it, For that reason, Eric Rohmer's Contes moraux (Moral tales) are truly a kind of French moralist counterpoint to Lacan's ethics of psychoanalysis (ne pas ceder sur son d.sir, "do not compromise your desire"), six lessons on how to gain or guard happiness by way of compromising one's desire. The matrix of all six films involves a male hero torn between an idealized woman, his (future) wife, and a temptress who arouses his desire for a passionate adventure. As a rule, the hero is not a passive object of the woman's advances, he rather actively constructs a detailed fantasmatic scenario of the adventure only to be able to resist its temptation. In short, he sacrifices the adventure in order to heighten the value of his marriage-to-come. The final formula of the films (half-mockingly endorsed by Rohmer) is thus: fantasize about illicit love adventure, but do not pass to the act, let the adventure remain a private fantasy about what "might have happened," a fantasy which will enable you to sustain your marriage. See Pascal Bonitzer's excellent study Eric Rohmer (Paris: Cahiers du Cinema, 1993).

9 See Jacques-Alain Miller, "Des semblants dans Ia relation entre les sexes," in La Cause freudienne 36, Paris 1997, 7-15.

10 See Jacques Lacan, "La jeunesse de Gide," in .crits (Paris: Seuil, 1966).

11 I rely here on a conversation with Kate Stables (BFI, London).

12 Janey Place, "Women in film noir;" in Women in film noir, edited by Ann Kaplan (London: BFI, 1980), 36.

13 Ibid,, 45.

14 See Judith Butler, The Psychic Life of Power (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

15 For a detailed analysis of the scene from Wild at Heart, see Appendix 2 to Slavoj Zizek, The Plague of Fantasies (London: Verso, 1997). Incidentally,

the crucial moment of The Last Seduction occurs when, in the course of a wild act of copulation in a car, the lover accusingly designates Linda Fiorentino

as a "fucking bitch," to which she responds by wildly beating the roof of the car with her hands and repeating with an uncanny, "unnatural" satisfaction, "I'm a fucking bitch...." This outburst, which functions as a kind of "war cry," is the only moment of the film in which Linda Fiorentino briefly abandons her attitude of manipulating distance and utters an engaged "full word"-no wonder that there is something vulnerable in this sudden outburst of self-exposure.

16 More precisely, the idyllic everyday family universe of Lumberton in Blue Velvet does not simply disappear in Lost Highway: it is present, but within the noir universe of Pete, in the guise of the suburban family house with a pool, in which his worried, but nonetheless uncannily indifferent and aloof parents live; there is also his "ordinary," non-fatal girlfriend, a clear equivalent to Sandy in Blue Velvet So what Lost Highway accomplishes is a kind of reflexive stepping-back, encompassing both poles of the Blue Velvet universe within the same domain, enframed by the aseptic alienated married life. Both poles of the Blue Velvet universe are thus denounced as fantasmatic: in them, we encounter the fantasy in its two poles, in its pacifying aspect (the idyllic family life) as well as in its destructive/obscene/excessive aspect.

17 Is this scene of the naked Arquette disappearing in the night and then the house exploding not a reference to Kasdan's Body Heat, in which Kathleen Turner stages her disappearance for the gaze of William Hurt?

18 The common feature between Renee and Alice is that they both dominate their male partner (Fred, Pete), although in a different way: in the couple Fred-Renee, Fred is active, instigating conversations, asking questions, while Renee does not properly collaborate, ignores his questions, eludes a clear answer, etc., and so eludes his domination, hystericizing Fred; in the couple Pete-Alice, Alice is active all the time and, again, dominates the situation because Pete is condemned to slavishly obey her orders and suggestions-even when, at first, he appears to defy her, he finally breaks down.

19 There are other features which remain the same in both universes-say, what both Fred and Pete have in common is their sensitivity for sound: Fred's sensitivity to music (saxophone) and Pete's sensitivity to the sound of the car engine.

20 Lynch on Lynch, edited by Chris Rodley (London: Faber and Faber 1997), 231-232.

21 See Chapter IV in Jacques Lacan, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis (New York: Norton, 1979). Is the fact that Pete's life is a kind of fantasmatic response to Fred's aseptic existence not confirmed by the role of the two detectives who inspect the house in the first part of the film and make ironic comments as if suspecting the husband's impotence? In Pete's

part of the Story, they are overtly impressed by his sexual exploits ("He sees more cunts than a toilet seat!"), as if Fred wants to impress them in his parallel existence?

22 With regard to this standard Freudian reading, one should insist that, with all its impression of psychedelic complexity, the plot of Lost Highway is not as new as it appears: there is a surprising parallel between Lost Highway and Cronenberg's The Naked Lunch, a film, based more on William Burroughs's life than on his novel of the same name, about William Lee, a drug-addict cockroach-exterminator and failed writer who, after killing his drug-addicted wife, enters the "interzone" (a hallucinatory state of mind structured like a nightmarish version of Casablanca, i.e., of [the Western vision of] Arab decadence) in which the rules of ordinary reality are suspended and nightmarish drug-induced visions are materialized (like his typewriter coming alive, i.e., growing legs and turning into a gigantic grotesque bug). Parallels with Lost Highway here are numerous: like Fred, Lee kills his wife in a fit of jealousy; as in Lost Highway, he then encounters in the "interzone" Joan Frost, a wife of the American writer Tom Frost, a different person played by the same actress as his murdered wife Judy Davis). Two narcotics detectives who, at the beginning of the film, take Lee in for questioning, strangely resemble the two detectives who visit Fred's house at the beginning of Lost Highway; even the figure of Mystery Man is somehow foreshadowed in the sinister Doctor Benway who. in order to cure Lee from his bug powder addiction, prescribes to him an even stronger narcotic which makes him kill his wife... And, to continue this line of associations, perhaps the best designation of this interzone is the title of another recent masterpiece, Atom Egoyan's Sweet Hereafter is the Zone not literally a "sweet hereafter, a fantasmatic landscape we enter after some real experience too traumatic to sustain it in reality (in the case of Egoyan's film, this refers to an accident in which the majority of the schoolchildren of a small Canadian village are killed when the schoolbus slides off the road into the frozen lake)?

23 The fact that Eddy's other name, Dick, is also a common term for phallus, seems to support the reading of the statement "Dick Laurant is dead as the assertion of the castration: father is always-already dead/castrated, there is no enjoying Other, the promise of fantasy (which stages this enjoyment in the figure of the excessively exuberant father) is a lure - THIS is the message Fred is not able to assume till the very end of the film.

24 The excessive character of Mr. Eddy is nicely rendered in the scene of his first encounter with Pete when Eddy offers him the assurance that, if anyone is bothering Pete, he will take care of him (making it clear with his gesticulation that he means murder or at least a very rough beating), and then, after Pete nods, repeats with excessive pleasure "I mean, really take care of him . . ."

25 When Michel Chion (see his David Lynch, new revised edition [Paris: Cahiers du Cinema/Etoile, 19981, 261-4) claims that the Mystery Man is the

embodiment of the camera as such, he points towards the same dimension of neutral observation-one should only add that this strange camera doesn't register ordinary reality, but directly the subject's fundamental fantasies themselves.

26 In his outstanding. unpublished paper, "Finding Ourselves on a Lost Highway," Tod McGowan (Southwest Texas State university) opposes Eddy and Mystery Man as the paternal Law versus the superego. Although there are strong arguments for such a reading (like the already-mentioned Kafkaesque formulation by the Mystery Man, "I came because you invited me ; and, furthermore, is it not that the Mystery Man enters when Fred "compromises his desire," as the materialization of his guilt for betraying his desire?), the fact remains that Eddy himself is already a superego figure, the "Thing that

makes the law," a law-enforcer full of exuberant life-asserting jouissance. The split between Eddy and the Mystery Man is thus rather the split inherent to the superego itself. the split between the exuberant jouissance of life-substance and the asexual symbolic machine of Knowledge.

27 See Nochimson, Passion of David Lynch, 179.

28 See Chion, David Lynch, 132. There is, as Nochimson correctly notices (see Nochimson, Passion of David Lynch, 122). also a phallic dimension to the twin personae of Little Man and Giant in the Red Room in "Twin Peaks": the two anamorphically distorted versions of "normal size" man, one too short, the other too large, like a penis in erection and non-erection. Their strange blurred talk is also a speech which is anamorphically distorted, turned into a vocal version of the stain in Holbein's Ambassadors.

29 And, incidentally, President Clinton's troubles with sexual harassment accusations provide a nice example of the class-bias of what is perceived as "psychologically convincing": Kathleen Willey's performance on "60 Minutes" was considered "convincing," because she was perceived as a woman of class, while Paula Jones was dismissed as low and trashy, a clear reference to her working-class looks (paradoxically, in a reversal typical of today's ideological space. the upper-class attitude is far more often appropriated by the leftist liberal position-no wonder that Paula Jones is supported and manipulated by rightist circles, while Willey was a dedicated Democrat!). So the old theatrical tradition in which "convincing" psychological conflicts and confessions are reserved for the upper class characters, while low-class characters enter to provide a moment of carnivalesque distraction (common jokes, etc.) is alive and well . . .

30 For a more detailed analysis of this displacement, see Chapter 3 of Slavoj Zizek, The Plague of Fantasies.

31 Cohn MacCabe, "Bayonets In Paradise," Sight and Sound, February 1999,14.

32 See Fred Pfeil, "Home Fires Burning," in Shades of Noir; edited by Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993).

33 The difference between Godard and Lynch is nonetheless crucial here: Godard transubstantiates vulgar cliches into a kind of mesmerizing poetic recital (the effect underlined by Delerue's pathetic music), while with Lynch, the effect remains uncannily disturbing, somehow Kafkaesque, i.e., one is not quite sure how to specify the sublime effect.

34 Furthermore, the fact that Fred says at the Elm's end in his intercom the words that he hears at the beginning points towards the possibility that everything that comes in between, i.e., after his transformation into Pete, effectively happened earlier.

35 As to the concept of perversion, see Gilles Deleuze, Coldness and Cruelty (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

36 Janet H. Murray, Hamlet on the Holodeck (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), 175.

37 Ibid, 135-6.

38 See Stephen lay Gould, Wonderful Life (New York: Norton, 1989).

39 See Virtual History, edited by Niall Ferguson (London: Macmillan, 1997).

40 See Bertolt Brecht, The Measure Taken, in The Jewish Wife and Other Short Plays (New York: Grove Press, 1965). For a detailed reading of The Measure Taken, see Chapter 5 of Slavoj Zizek, Enjoy Your Symptom! (New York: Routledge, 1993).

41 In other words, apropos of Brecht's "learning plays," one should ask a na.ve straightforward question: what, effectively, are we, the spectators, supposed to learn from them? Not some corps of positive knowledge (In this case. instead of trying to discern the Marxist idea wrapped in the "dramatic" scenery, it would certainly be better to read directly the philosophical work itself), but a certain subjective attitude, that of "saying YES to the inevitable," i.e., the readiness to self-obliteration. In away, one learns precisely the virtue of accepting the Decision, the Rule, without knowing why.

42 With regard to this structural necessity of multiple inconsistent fantasies; see the analyses of Capra's Meet John Doe and Hitchcock's Notorious in Chapter 4 of Slavoj Zizek, The Plague of Fantasies.

43 Murray, Hamlet on the Holodeck, 169-170.

44 See Sigmund Freud, "A child is being beaten," in Sexuality and the Psychology of Love (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 97-122.

45 See Sigmund Freud, "Psychoanalytical Notes Upon an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia," in Three Case Histories (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 139-141.

46 J.. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, The Language of Psychoanalysis (London: Karnac Books, 1988),
315.

47 Yuji Konno, "Noise Floats, Night Falls in David Lynch. Paintings and Drawings (Tokyo Museum of Contemporary Art 1991), 23.